The Roots Grow Riotous by hansbekhart

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Summary:

Sometimes Lan Zhan doesn’t work through lunch. Sometimes he makes conversation with coworkers in the halls. Sometimes he goes home instead of spending the last hour trawling through Grindr. But mostly, that’s exactly what he does. The sameness is comforting. His life spools out in easily measured increments: capsule collections, yards of hand dyed textiles, ninety day lead times, sell through figures, cost of goods sold.

Every date in manufacturing can be calculated backwards and forward from a single horizon point: the date that the goods must arrive into the country where they'll be sold. Other than that, nothing else really matters.

Notes:

Please heed the tags - this isn't a straight forward fashion AU. There's substantial material that involves plant-based body horror ... growing plants out of your body, to be specific.

I owe so much to my editor, Emi! Thank you so much for all of the heavy lifting you've done so far and all that I'll ask you to do in the future, haaah. Thank you also to the CQLLECTIVE for letting me talk their ears off for literally months about this.

You can find me on Twitter @hansbekhart, and I've got a thread of inspo images and thoughts here. This story will be novel length and is about halfway written. I'm aiming for a weekly posting schedule.

(See the end of the work for other works inspired by this one.)

Chapter 1

Chapter Text

[image]

(cover by @emiblake)

The profile is sparse. Two photos, both body shots. No face. The sharp angle of a jawline. The barest suggestion of straight black hair, long enough to swing in a ponytail. The first message had come during the day while Lan Zhan was still at work - innocuous enough that he'd replied sitting at his desk, picking over the hot lunch his brother had gotten for him from the least worst buffet place within three blocks. It tasted like nothing much, and his desk was covered with paperwork turned face down. Grindr was a good distraction. Even better that the message was more interesting than *hey* or *Cut???* or a straight to the point *Wanna cum on your face.*

The first message said, *this is exactly the kind of day that fools people into thinking New York is a nice city.*

The second message said, *don't worry i'm from here, i can say that.*

Lan Zhan laughed. Barely more than an exhale, not loud enough to make Miriam look up from her own lunch. By the time he'd reached over and picked up the phone, a third message had come through.

Are you out enjoying the sunshine?

Lan Zhan clicked on the profile. Looked at the two body shots. Read,

Online

1106 feet away

6'1"

Asian

Looking For: Chat, Dates, Relationship

No profile either. Just a name, barely: WY?

I am at work, Lan Zhan replied. It seemed unfriendly. He added, *Are you?*

In response he got a photo. Somewhere in Midtown, maybe on the east side. A halo of light coming through the grey buildings, bouncing off the glass of half constructed towers. It was the most sunlight Lan Zhan had seen all day.

“A-Zhan?”

They’d talked for a while, after that photo. About work, mostly - the first thing a New Yorker will ask you is either what you do or where you live, and after that how much you pay in rent. WY? seemed knowledgeable enough about Lan Zhan’s work that maybe he worked in fashion as well. Lan Zhan hadn’t asked WY? if he wanted to meet, but he’d wanted to. He’d been going to. And then WY? had simply stopped replying, about two hours ago.

“A-Zhan, are you listening to me?”

Lan Zhan refocuses. Lan Huan is standing in their kitchen, a knife in one hand.

Lan Zhan lifts himself off the couch and comes over to sit on one of the kitchen stools, across the broad counter. Earlier, he'd pasted WY's last message into Google's translation box, which had given him 啊那有什么意义. It wasn't as helpful as he’d like. He hands his brother the phone. “What does this mean?” he asks. Lan Huan flinches when he sees Grindr open, even though Lan Zhan had been careful to click through to his conversation with WY? first.

“Is it okay if I,” Lan Huan asks, and does. “‘What’s the point?’” he reads out loud, then scrolls up and reads through the rest of the conversation. Lan Zhan itches the back of his neck absently, looking at the countertop. The cutting board is full of Napa cabbage and mushrooms. There are garlic shoots chopped in a bowl. Tofu under

a cloth, weighted under a bag of rice. Plastic containers from the Chinese grocery, the sides fogged: shredded pork, preserved greens. A pack of thin noodles to the side, ready to go into a pot of broth. Lan Zhan frowns.

“Hmm,” Lan Huan says. “Well, it doesn’t sound good. It’s like a - *why bother,* or *who cares* sort of thing. Oh, you have a new message.” He hands the phone back, very quickly.

“Hm,” Lan Zhan says, looking down at his phone. Not from WY?. It’s a picture. “So it’s rhetorical.”

“That’s how I would understand it,” Lan Huan says. “Or maybe a joke, but he didn’t say anything after.”

“He made a lot of jokes,” Lan Zhan admits.

“I saw,” Lan Huan says. “Do you want me to translate them for you?”

Lan Zhan shakes his head. He opens the new message, the screen angled carefully away from his brother. “He hasn’t been active since,” he says. The message is a photo of an erect cock, held tight in one hairy knuckled fist. Lan Zhan studies it thoughtfully. Itches his neck again.

“A-Zhan,” Lan Huan says, very delicately. His knuckles curl along the edge of the cutting board. “Are you disappointed?”

“No,” Lan Zhan says. He clicks over to see who the owner of the cock and knuckles is: good face, nothing obviously terrible in the profile. *Tonight?* he messages back. He looks back at his brother. “It’s Grindr. People stop replying all the time.”

Lan Huan’s knuckles turn white and then relax. “I meant about not showing at fashion week.”

Lan Zhan looks away. Looks over the ingredients sprawled across the counter. His phone buzzes. *I’m free,* Hairy Knuckles says. *Where do u live?*

I will meet you, Lan Zhan says. *Address?*

“A-Zhan,” Lan Huan says, a thin thread of exasperation.

“No,” Lan Zhan says. He clicks on the drop pin Hairy Knuckles sends him. Upper West. An Irish bar. Fine. “I’m going out.”

Lan Huan’s expression shifts. “I’m making dinner,” he says, gesturing to the counter as if Lan Zhan hadn’t noticed. “We need to talk.” Adds, more softly, “It’s your favorite.”

“We meet next Wednesday with the merchandise team,” Lan Zhan says. “What else is there to talk about?”

He meets his brother’s eyes evenly, and doesn’t say anything else.

“All right,” Lan Huan sighs. His shoulders slump. He reaches for his own phone, opens WeChat with his thumb. “See you tomorrow, then.”

Lan Zhan comes home. He *always* comes home. But not always early enough that they see each other before work. He nods. Gets his keys and shoes and coat, and leaves.

Outside, it’s still the sort of day that makes a lie of New York City. The orange sun claws its fingers down between the buildings, almost but not quite close enough to kiss the pavement. The air smells nearly cool and sweet. The people who pass walk slowly, faces relaxed just barely enough to smile. He drapes the coat over his arm and tips his face back into the sunshine for just a moment. A moment more.

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The cab winds through lower Manhattan and onto the West Side Highway. It’s slow going for twenty blocks or so, picks up for the

same length of time, slows down again. The Hudson River sparkles; even New Jersey looks pretty, from a distance. Lan Zhan rests his chin on his palm, closes his eyes. Absently scratches at the back of his neck.

Then flinches. His fingers press down - there.

Music on the radio drowns out the abruptly ragged sound of his breathing. He opens his eyes and stares at nothing for thirty blocks. They exit the highway and wind through surface streets, and he stays very still the entire time, his fingertips pressed tightly against the tense muscle at the base of his skull. The shape he can feel underneath.

“This the place?” the cab driver asks.

Lan Zhan looks up. They’re parked. Irish bar. Something beyond his ability to pronounce painted across the front. Wooden barrels out front. Drunk white people smoking cigarettes. A chalkboard sign advertising chicken wings. “Thank you,” he says automatically, and pays.

He finds Hairy Knuckles at the bar, his hairy hands wrapped around a pint glass. He looks up when Lan Zhan approaches, and asks, disbelievingly, “John?”

He looks like his pictures. Lan Zhan sits down anyway.

“Joey,” he says.

Joey leans back on his stool, looking Lan Zhan up and down. “I kinda thought you might be a catfish,” he says. “Too pretty to be real.”

Lan Zhan knows the term. It’s not the first time someone has said that to him, meeting for the first time off Grindr. “Do you want a drink?” Joey asks, half turned already to order.

“No,” Lan Zhan says. He keeps his hands on the bar, instead of the back of his neck.

Joey grins, a little tentative. His gaze roams up and down, but he

doesn't try to touch. "Wow," he says, and shakes his head. "You wanna get out of here, then?"

"Fine," Lan Zhan says.

The apartment Joey takes him to is a few blocks away. As they turn onto his block the city falls away abruptly into the river, still sparkling, still pretty, more orange and red, lights from the highway and the city across the water, the dark mass of the Palisades beyond. Joey talks as they walk, in the elevator, in the hallway. He says things about growing up in New Jersey, how long he's been in New York, how he can't wait to stuff his cock into Lan Zhan's pretty mouth.

Lan Zhan says, "Where is your bathroom?"

It's the kind of apartment that's just a kitchen and closed bedroom doors, a shoddily built wall covering up where a living room used to be and is now just another bedroom. The apartment is dark despite the early hour; cracks of light show underneath the other doors. Lan Zhan doesn't turn on the light after he closes the bathroom door behind himself. He stands there in the dark for a long moment, eyes closed.

He fumbles behind himself for the switch. Meets his own eyes in the mirror, blinking harshly. Strips his shirt off with harsh motions and turns around, craning his neck to see.

There are two of them. One nearly hidden by the long fall of his hair, only the barest curl of a leaf trailing down his neck. The other, two spindly vines nestled between his shoulder blade and spine, sprouting from one hole. Lan Zhan grits his teeth, and digs his fingers in.

The trick, he has learned already, is to go slow. Too fast and the stem will break, leaving the roots to itch and dig just under his skin. There's a healing scab across his lower back from the first time it happened, where the roots had spread and he'd had to cut open thin, careful lines to dig them out. So it has to be done slowly, but slowly means he feels each separate fiber detach and pull wetly along the muscle.

It hurts. He watches his face in the mirror the whole time he does it, waiting to see if it flinches.

He leaves the plants in the sink while he wets toilet paper and cleans away the thin, red-stained liquid trickling out of the holes in his body. Whatever it is, he doesn't usually bleed for long. After, he washes the plants clean, dries them, wraps them in toilet paper, and puts them in his jacket pocket to throw away later. The motions are automatic, practiced. He turns out the light.

Joey is waiting in the bedroom across the hall. His shirt is off. His jeans opened and spread wide. His cock pulled free, hard and red in the open air, clutched in one hairy knuckled hand. He says, panting lightly, "You ready to get your asshole wrecked?"

Lan Zhan closes the door behind himself. He hangs his coat on the hook on the door, fingers trailing lightly over the bundle in the pocket, making sure it's secure and hidden.

"That's cute," he says. Joey's eyes follow the motion of his hands, dipping lower as each shirt button is undone. "Lay down on the bed."

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Lan Zhan wakes early every morning. He shares an apartment with his brother in a luxury building in lower Manhattan, on an unlucky floor. He would have taken the smaller bedroom regardless, but it had come with the benefit of being a corner room, with floor to ceiling windows on two sides. He'd set his bed in that corner and wakes every morning to the ash gray dawn of Brooklyn across the river, two bridges stretching out from the concrete tangle, heading south and east. To get to 34th Street it's twenty minutes by subway or about the same if he takes a bike. Sometimes in the morning he

walks down to the piers and sits underneath FDR Drive, watching boats sluice through the oily water. Sometimes he walks to where St James meets the Bowery and buys pastries for the office, which he leaves in reception without credit except for the dozen egg tarts to be carefully doled out within the ORCHiD team. But he hasn't done any of that for a while.

When he and Lan Huan came to New York, they used to go out together - for dinner after work, for drinks with their new colleagues. One time they walked for miles up the west side of Manhattan in near perfect silence, before admitting defeat around Columbus Circle. But those things haven't happened for a while now either.

These days, mostly, he wakes early. He eats breakfast alone in the quiet kitchen of their apartment. He examines his back in the bathroom mirror and uproots anything that's grown overnight. He'd thought it was cystic acne at first, just strange bumps under the skin. Then some kind of infection, maybe, when little green hairs started to sprout from them. He'd made an appointment with a dermatologist and then missed it, when the morning of the appointment a viscous, living vine had pushed its way up between his shoulder blades and unfurled two tiny leaves, their serrated edges coated with something that wasn't quite blood. He still has the voicemail on his phone, calling to ask if he'd like to reschedule. He doesn't plan to. It doesn't happen every day. More like once a week. Maybe twice a week. It's only been six months.

He takes the subway to 34th Street, and arrives at the Empire State Building before the tourists, and the hawkers in red jackets who know better than to try and sell him double decker bus tickets. He walks through the employee lobby and nods at the guard, and takes the elevator to another unlucky floor. He unlocks the front door of the office that says Interwoven Apparel, and has seven other brands listed on the wall besides ORCHiD (not counting private label programs). He leaves his studio door open until the rabbit warren of cubicles fills with voices, and then he closes it.

Sometimes he doesn't work through lunch. Sometimes he and Miriam eat together. Sometimes he makes conversation with coworkers in the halls. Sometimes he leaves the office before it's

fully dark. Sometimes he even goes home instead of spending the last hour trawling through Grindr, waiting for someone even mildly interesting to appear. But mostly, that's exactly what he does. The sameness is comforting. If he doesn't change, then nothing else has to either. His life will spool out in easily measured increments: capsule collections, yards of hand dyed textiles, ninety day lead times, sell through figures, cost of goods sold.

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The morning they start fittings for ORCHiD's Resort collection, Lan Zhan wakes early. He finds and digs out one vine and two flowers from his back. One of them is deep enough to need a bandage afterwards. He finds a smudge of blood on his thumb while he's on the subway. The five blocks he walks, between his apartment and the train, and the train and the office, pass in a cool daze. It's another nice day in New York, but he thinks instead of August's deep heat, counting backwards thirty days, fifteen, sixty five days. He looks at the calendar on his phone as he walks, adjusting his schedule for the next few weeks. He nods at the guard in the employee lobby. He unlocks the front door of Interwoven Apparel. He goes to the men's room to wash the blood off his hands.

Miriam arrives a little after nine, yawning over her cart coffee and cart bagel. They spend a nice hour or so in comfortable silence, as she answers the overnight emails from their main factory, JLT, and the assorted trim vendors underneath them, and he works on concept boards for Spring. Miriam's title is Product Development

Manager, and she is his right hand at every step of their work.

Once she asks, laughing, “What time did your brother go to bed last night? This last email to JLT is time stamped for two a.m.”

“I don’t know,” Lan Zhan answers. He’d gotten home around midnight himself. The apartment lights had been off, except for the one coming from underneath Lan Huan’s bedroom door. He’d gone to bed instead of knocking. This morning his date sent pouty emojis and pictures of the bruises and bite marks Lan Zhan had left on him, and asked if he wants to hook up again sometime. Lan Zhan hasn’t answered.

At ten fifteen, she says, “The model’s running late.”

“Of course,” Lan Zhan says.

Miriam snorts. “Are you gonna chase this one off too?”

“We interview fit models for a reason,” Lan Zhan says.

“You’re gonna chase this one off,” she says.

“I will not chase him off,” Lan Zhan says. “You can’t chase away a person you pay to do a job. You only do not hire them again.”

“I didn’t think he was that bad,” Miriam says.

“He thought his job was to be a mannequin,” Lan Zhan says. He studies the illustration under his hands carefully. “To only wear the clothes. I need someone who can tell me what is wrong with the clothes and why.”

At ten forty, her desk phone buzzes. She says, “The model’s here. I’ll go get him.”

She leaves the office door open behind her. He gets up and closes it. Interwoven’s offices take up most of two floors and are dense with cubicles. Reception is on the floor below, and Miriam will cut through a break room and the customer service department to reach it through the interior stairs. It’ll take her a few minutes to get there and back.

He stares at the pencil sketches spread out over his desk. Shuffles them into a neat pile and gets to his feet.

His brother's office is next to his own. It's smaller, since Lan Huan handles the sales side of their business, and doesn't need space to draft patterns or drape garments. He keeps no sketchbooks, no stacks of paper. His office is very clean. There's a filing cabinet in the corner that Lan Zhan isn't sure he actually uses. The same wide glass desk that Lan Zhan has. Framed on the wall is ORCHiD's business registration with the Chinese government, a photo of the two of them taken at Lan Zhan's college graduation, and a watercolor croquis.

Lan Huan always keeps his office door open. He smiles when Lan Zhan comes in and takes a seat across from him. There are two monitor screens, angled away from the always open door, and covered with a privacy film. From the edges Lan Zhan can see spreadsheets, open emails, opaque and unreadable when he moves. "I want to apologize," he says.

Lan Huan blinks at him.

"The other night, I didn't give you a chance to speak," Lan Zhan says. It's hard to hold his brother's gaze. Over Lan Huan's shoulder he can see open sky, the ridges of tall, soot-covered buildings. He presses his palms together and admits, "I am disappointed we won't be showing at Fashion Week."

Lan Huan's face softens. "I know. You don't hide it very well." He adds, "I'm disappointed too. I know how much it means to you."

"It's good press," Lan Zhan says immediately. He looks at the wall instead of his brother, at the indulgent face he's making. Their faces are pale and overexposed in the framed photo; Lan Zhan's is horribly round with baby fat. Their mother drew the croquis, which is delicately rendered and a little unremarkable. Lan Zhan has one that's similar, but it hangs next to his bed instead. They sit for a moment in a silence that feels contemplative, and much easier.

"What did you want to talk about?" Lan Zhan asks.

“Ah,” Lan Huan says. His eyes flick over to his monitor. “Don’t you have an interview right now?”

Lan Zhan frowns. He can hear voices coming through the open door: Miriam’s, the model’s, and their Director of Production. What did she want? Hopefully Miriam was putting her off. Lan Zhan isn’t sure he can face Wen Qing before the merchandise meeting. “Tonight, then,” Lan Zhan says.

Lan Huan’s lips press together. “I have plans with Mingjue tonight,” he says. “It’s fine, A-Zhan. I only wanted to talk over the sales plan. It can wait until after the merchandise meeting. I’m sure it’ll change then anyway.”

The noises from the hallway fade. They must have gone inside the studio and closed the door behind them. Lan Zhan nods. He stands. Hesitates. “What can I do?” he asks. “To help. If budget is the issue, then I can -”

“A-Zhan,” Lan Huan says. “It’s okay. All I need is for you to keep doing what you’re doing. We’ll make it work.” He nods his head towards the door and smiles. “Try not to chase this one off, okay?”

“I will consider it,” Lan Zhan tells him, and sweeps out of the room.

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Lan Zhan opens up the studio door and finds laughter on the other side. It’s Miriam who’s laughing. She’s leaning against her desk and has a tray of iced drinks in her hand. The model is laughing too, and he’s one of the most beautiful men Lan Zhan has ever seen. Asian, tall, tanned skin, long legs, big doe eyes. The kind of rangy, lanky body that begs for beautiful clothing, or for beautiful clothing to be stripped off of it. His teeth are overly large for his face when

he smiles, exactly the sort of imperfection that pushes a face from catalog to memorable. His smile, which is aimed down at Miriam and flicked casually up when Lan Zhan comes into the room, is arresting.

The model hesitates, the smile flickering on his face for just a moment before he fixes it back in place. He crosses the office in a few long steps and sticks a hand out. “Hi,” he says, “I’m Shawn Wei.”

Of course he’s beautiful. It’s his job to be beautiful. And this is New York, and Lan Zhan grew up in Shanghai. There are many beautiful people in the world, and a great many of them live in New York and Shanghai. “Hello,” he says, and they shake hands.

Shawn’s eyes move all the way up and down Lan Zhan’s body. “Sorry I’m late,” he says. He’s not smiling anymore, not exactly, but his mouth still holds the shape of it. He nods at the drinks that Miriam is carrying. “I had the *worst* luck with the subway coming in today - my train went local, they made us all get off at Court Square, it was a mess. My agency said they called but I brought you guys some drinks to make up for the trouble. I hope you drink coffee, um -”

“Sorry!” Miriam says. “This is John, my boss. He and his brother Stephen started ORCHiD. John is the designer.”

“John,” Shawn repeats, and smiles. His eyes crinkle when he does it. He’s still holding Lan Zhan’s hand.

Lan Zhan takes his hand away. “Thank you for coming in,” he says stiffly. “We will get started.” The smile only grows, undeterred. It’s a mercy when the man turns away, stripping off his sweater (Westwood, 2017, but who’s noticing) so that Miriam can confirm the measurements on his CV. Underneath he’s got on one of those cocky printed tee shirts that Lan Zhan hates. It says *NO!* in cartoonish letters, and it’s so thin it’s nearly see through. Lan Zhan almost snaps his pencil in half.

He turns his back to rifle through the garment rack. Shawn had come recommended from one of the other brands under Interwoven

Apparel - they'd said he was out of proportion for sportswear but gave excellent feedback - and his CV was excellent, but the last fit model had a good CV as well. Lan Zhan interviews fit models for a reason.

Shawn and Miriam chat while she wraps measuring tape around his neck, his chest, waist, arm, sleeve, inseam. Lan Zhan lets the English wash over him, not bothering to try and follow along. They're laughing, so he probably couldn't anyway. Jokes and idioms are always the hardest part of a language, more context than vocabulary, and he's not funny in Chinese either.

Three pieces. A jacket, a pair of trousers, and a dress. ORCHiD is a unisex brand, although Interwoven's Marketing department does what they want with that. Shawn looks at the dress with interest. "Very pretty," he says appreciatively. "Is it a digital print? Or hand painted?"

"Hand painted," Miriam confirms, when Lan Zhan says nothing. "John did it himself. This is from last year's Fall collection."

"Okay to start with the jacket?" Shawn asks. He takes it off the hanger that Lan Zhan is holding, and holds eye contact as he shrugs it on. "These are prototype samples, right? The lining's gorgeous but it's not a full color match in all the panels. Did you make this too, John? Wow, you put pocket bags even in prototypes, huh? Very thorough, I like it. I'd almost think this was a production garment, it's so nice."

He stretches both arms forward and then pulls his elbows behind himself, testing the full range of motion. Miriam makes a face at Lan Zhan over Shawn's bent head. He makes a face back, and her lips press around a laugh. She's one of the only people at Interwoven who's not scared of Lan Zhan, which along with her fierce technical competence is why he'd set to wooing her away from the private label team almost as soon as she'd been hired. Her second anniversary at ORCHiD is coming up, and he has reservations booked at Congee Village that he hasn't told her about yet.

"Okay," Shawn says, drawing their attention back, "well, the

shoulders are too tight, but you know that already, that's why you picked out this sample. I feel like maybe the lining is part of the problem, actually - well, let me know if I'm stepping on your toes here and you want me to stick to the basic stuff, but can I make a few suggestions?"

"Please," Lan Zhan says. Miriam leans against her desk, waiting. She reaches for one of the coffees that Shawn brought and makes a happy noise into the lid.

Shawn nods. His fingers pluck at the glass buttons. He looks away finally, towards the full length mirror they keep along the side wall. The morning light catches his eyes and turns them translucent, like a gemstone, or a cup of coffee when you hold it up in front of the sun. Lan Zhan looks at the tray of coffees, still at his elbow. He picks up the iced coffee, ignoring the packets of sweetener. It sweats in his hand.

"Okay," Shawn says. "Well, obviously you could add some ease to the shoulders, bring the side seams in to compensate. But I'd still worry about the sheer fabric on top, it's so delicate. The customer could Hulk right out of the seams if they move the wrong way, if it's as form-fitting as you have it right now. But if you dropped the shoulder you'd lose that lovely hard silhouette. So - okay, I have two suggestions. Maybe three."

He looks Lan Zhan all the way up and down again, this time checking for a reaction. Lan Zhan stays very still for it, giving him nothing. Infuriatingly, Shawn's smile stretches, slow and so satisfied that it belies the intent look in his eyes. "First suggestion," he says, "add a front and back yoke in a suit weight fabric and fuse your top layer to it. Add a half inch all around the sleeves, fix the shoulder line in production by steaming the shit out of it, and take out the darts in the back so that the outer layer falls straight down."

"Hm," Lan Zhan says.

Undeterred, Shawn continues, "Or - this one's maybe a little more out there, but have you tried a nice jersey knit for the lining? Something with a good amount of Spandex in it. You'd still have to really nail down the ease in the exterior fabric, but it'll give the

customer a better feeling of movement between the shoulder blades. If you extend the back darts then you can keep the body fitted without putting any other pressure on the big seams." He flicks his eyes to the ceiling, considering. "Double knit, maybe. If this was for Fall." Then he asks, abruptly, "Hey, would it be better if we did this in Chinese? I can go either way."

Lan Zhan looks up, the ghost of a smile falling off his face. Shawn uses a lot of unnecessary words, and he talks fast. Lan Zhan's been following along enough to understand the gist of what he's saying, if not all the descriptors. It would be easier. He feels relief and then anger. "English is fine," he says.

"Yeah yeah of course," Shawn says, this time in Chinese. "Your English is great. But it's easier this way, right? Then I can talk faster, too." He laughs at himself, and switches back. "I didn't even ask. Miriam, is that okay with you?"

Miriam eyes Lan Zhan, weighing her options. She's Chinese as well, but American born, third generation. "If you don't mind taking the notes," she says cautiously. Lan Zhan nods. She smiles at Shawn and says, rolling her eyes, "Lao Zhan is a living reminder of my parents' disappointment in my shitty vocabulary, anyway."

Shawn's teeth dig into his lower lip. "Oh no," he says, "look at that happy face, how could he be disappointed?"

Unfairly, Miriam bursts out laughing.

"What else?" Lan Zhan asks evenly, in Chinese, because he can.

"Aw," Miriam says. "Aren't you going to tell him which one we ended up going with?"

"No," Lan Zhan says. He takes a sip of coffee. It's sweet, even without the sugar. "How long do we have you today?"

Shawn blinks at him peaceably, like a cat. "I'm yours until 4," he says, and smiles. "You want me to try on the dress next?"

"Yes," Lan Zhan says. "But let's hear your third idea first."

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After, they talk through the details.

“We’ll need you for four days a week, six hours a day, for two weeks,” Lan Zhan tells him. “They don’t need to be the same days, but earlier in the week is better. After that, we’ll want you back for a second round of fitting when the initial prototypes come in.”

“Like - two weeks later? Ish?” Shawn asks, his head bent over the calendar on his phone. He’d tied his chin length hair into a little bun while they were talking through the dress, and Lan Zhan can see the knobs of his spine and the wings of his shoulder blades through his shirt. “Yeah, that should be fine. I need to finish up by 4 on Mondays and Thursdays but I can come in early to make up for it.”

“The ad samples will be finished at the same time, if you’re available,” Lan Zhan says.

Shawn hums thoughtfully. “For print work? Sure, if the hours are the same. I’ll email you an updated contract. And my rider.” Then he actually winks. “Do you need a second model for the print stuff?”

Miriam looks up, her lips tight. “We’ll have to check the budget,” Lan Zhan says, not looking at her. “Do you have someone to recommend?”

“Oh, almost always,” Shawn says, and slips his phone back into his pocket. He pulls his sweater back on. He holds out his hand. “See you Monday then, Lan Zhan.”

Lan Zhan’s fingers spasm around Shawn’s, unexpectedly. He doesn’t

know what his face is doing. Hopefully not much. Shawn tilts his head. “Did I get it wrong?”

“No,” Lan Zhan manages. “No, that’s right. Thank you.” He’s still holding Shawn’s hand. “And you? What do you prefer?”

“Oh!” Shawn says, and laughs, big and beautiful. “Thanks for asking. You can call me Wei Ying.”

Chapter 2

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

The weekend is quiet. He doesn't see his brother much. He doesn't go out on Friday night or Saturday. He doesn't think about Wei Ying's rabbity smile, his laugh, the angle of his shoulder blade. He takes his personal sketchbook down to the piers and draws until the sun crosses all the way over Manhattan, until he fills it completely with ideas that will mostly be thrown away. That's the process: churn out a thousand sketches in the hope of keeping one hundred, and maybe from those one hundred, ten or fifteen will eventually walk a runway. Another twenty or thirty to flesh out a retail collection, a handful offered as sacrifice to buyers who will commit to a minimum order for exclusivity. Even when he's only drawing for himself - creating fantasies that will never walk anywhere, will never be seen by anyone else - that is always the process. His office has a whole cabinet of filled sketchbooks, pads of tracing paper, stacks of bristol boards, carefully packed and shipped from their old offices in Shanghai, added to in the years since. Even now, he finds it hard to let go of any of it.

On Sunday he goes into the office and spends hours redrafting the best designs from his work sketchbook, rendering textures in pencil, painting it all over with delicate watercolors, tacking them to boards, cutting out little magazine clippings and swatches of fabric and gluing them along the side. They look good. Saleable. He thinks management will be pleased. He hopes Lan Huan will be, at least. At seven thirty he leaves the office and meets a stranger in the West Village for a mediocre blowjob in the bathroom of a karaoke bar. Afterwards he walks the mile or so to Chinatown for cheap dumplings, to be eaten on a styrofoam plate, standing up, drenched in black vinegar.

Do you want dumplings? he texts to Lan Huan. There's no reply by the time he's finished eating, so he buys a frozen pack of thirty to bring back to the cold, empty apartment. He sits for a long time on his bed, facing the window and the bridges and the city below his bare feet.

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On Monday, Wei Ying arrives punctually, with an iced coffee, a smile, a beautifully embroidered black coat, and another stupid tee shirt underneath it, which says *HAVE YOU MET ME?* in big letters, and then underneath it, *have you met me* three more times, in smaller letters. Lan Zhan stifles a sigh, and then another one when Wei Ying slips most of his clothes off and stands bare chested in the center of the room, waiting to be dressed by Lan Zhan's hands.

"You look nice today, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says. Lan Zhan sniffs. Of course he looks nice, he's wearing Proenza Schouler. "Miriam, doesn't he look handsome?"

"He always looks handsome," Miriam says absently, her attention on her computer.

"You look nice today too, Miriam," Wei Ying tells her, dripping with sincerity.

"Are you ready?" Lan Zhan asks.

Wei Ying shakes his shoulders, takes a last sip of his coffee, wipes the condensation off on his underwear, and settles in to focus. He's as good as he was in the interview, even when the samples Lan Zhan helps him into are missing seams or lining, are in the wrong fabric, or are not much more than muslin placeholders. He holds very still as Lan Zhan pinches fabric together and slides dozens of

pins through it, careful not to prick his skin. His feedback is thorough. He skips from armhole to neck to hem and back again while Lan Zhan takes notes. When each garment comes off Wei Ying's body, Miriam takes it carefully, marks it up, and begins the painstaking process of disassembling it, to turn each draped section into a pattern the factory's sample makers can work with.

It's a soothing way to pass the morning. The office's windows face south, and they're on a high enough floor that the room stays bright even though there's no direct sunlight. Wei Ying makes small talk as they work, the usual stuff. He starts with, "How long have you been in New York?"

"Four years," Lan Zhan says. "Can you - ?"

"Sure," Wei Ying says, and turns to walk the room. He has a good walk, confident and smooth. Not too clumpy, the way a lot of male models tend towards. He leans back just a little, emphasizing his height, allowing the clothes to hang naturally from his shoulders. "You might want to bring the wrists up little," he says as he pivots and makes his way back to Lan Zhan. "It fits me fine but I think I'm a bit more noodly than your target customer. How'd you end up here, anyway? I creeped on your website a bit, hope that's not weird. It said you and your brother started the line while you were still in Shanghai, right?"

Lan Zhan tucks his fingers inside the jacket sleeve, curling it up. His fingertips brush Wei Ying's wrist, despite his best intentions. "Two centimeters?"

"This'll sound fiddly, but it's usually one and a half with my other clients," Wei Ying says.

"Not fiddly," Lan Zhan says absently, and then adds, "We showed in New York Fashion Week. Part of the -"

"The Asian showcase, right?" Wei Ying asks. The corner of his mouth crooks up. Lan Zhan lifts his as well in wry acknowledgement.

"Yes," he says. "It went well."

Wei Ying laughs. “Obviously. You’re here, aren’t you?”

Lan Zhan lifts one shoulder, lets it drop. “Investment was part of the goal. We were looking to grow the brand.”

“Did it work?”

The first year with Interwoven, they’d shown twice in New York, for Spring and Fall. Their production orders tripled. They’d eased business out of the family factory and into the factory Interwoven’s better brands worked with, the Taiwanese owned JLT. The first year, Lan Huan had spent nearly as much time in Hangzhou as he had in New York. Lan Zhan went only once, going straight from Pudong Airport to Hangzhou (and, three days later, directly back again) to meet with the sample room and the two sample makers JLT had assigned to ORCHiD’s brand, to walk them through that particular collection and the intricacies of each garment and how he needed each sales sample to be finished - and afterwards it had been fine, mostly. JLT’s sample room had never really been the problem.

“The brand has grown,” Lan Zhan allows.

Wei Ying is looking at him thoughtfully, and Lan Zhan allows a wry twist to his mouth, to say what he can’t say for himself. Wei Ying gives him the same smile back, to show that they are on the same wavelength. They both know the industry. How it works. It’s one of those things that even people outside of fashion *know*, however they’ve managed to glean the information - from movies and media, from half-formed biases, rootless and untraceable - that fashion, like any big city but especially like New York, will eat you for component parts.

Wei Ying walks back and forth across the space so many times he might start wearing a path in the carpet, and when he’s not walking he turns towards Lan Zhan like a flower, following him instead of the sun. There’s a tension there, in the way that Wei Ying goes abruptly quiet and then flicks his eyes up, seeking Lan Zhan’s gaze. Lan Zhan likes it. There’s too much to do - no time, and they’re both here doing a job, and it would be unprofessional to do anything in front of Miriam anyway - but it’s nice, to just let that tension be

there between them. To meet Wei Ying's eyes and let him feel it too for just a moment, before he turns away and gets the next sample.

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When Miriam has been dispatched to a meeting on Lan Zhan's behalf (it's a meeting to prepare for next Wednesday's meeting, and he doesn't want to attend either), Wei Ying says, "Hey, I'm sorry about the other week."

Lan Zhan pauses. His hands are pressed along Wei Ying's back, feeling carefully for the span and angle of the darts that will flare out of the partially sewn center back seam. "What do you mean?" he asks. They only met a few days ago. What could there be to apologize for? Is Lan Zhan being too forward, too presumptuous? He didn't think he was making Wei Ying uncomfortable, but maybe -

Wei Ying twists to look at Lan Zhan over his shoulder. His smile falters. "Oh," he says, "I thought - never mind. I thought you'd -" He laughs. Lan Zhan waits. He keeps his fingers still instead of impatiently pinching Wei Ying like he wants to.

"Recognized me," Wei Ying finishes after a moment, pathetically. "You know, from Grindr."

Lan Zhan frowns at him, confused, until suddenly the answer slides into place. The sharp jawline, the swing of straight black hair, and, damningly obvious, the body he's been staring at in close range all day. WY? and the abrupt silence that followed.

"Oh," Lan Zhan says. "That was you?"

"Sorry for ghosting you," Wei Ying says.

Lan Zhan shakes his head. He resumes what he was doing, folding and pinning. He could have done this part on a mannequin, but he'd wanted to see how the fabric moved. "It's fine," he says. "It's Grindr. People stop replying all the time."

"To *you?"* Wei Ying asks. It feels mockingly incredulous. "That seems fake. I refuse to believe it. No one's that dumb."

Lan Zhan presses his lips together, shifting to the next dart placement. "You did," he points out. He can feel Wei Ying's whole body jerk minutely, reflexively, as his fingertips brush over nerve clusters along his spine.

"Yeah," Wei Ying sighs. "I'm pretty dumb."

"That seems fake," Lan Zhan tells him. "I refuse to believe it."

Wei Ying cranes his chin over his shoulder, his eyes wide and then crinkling up, before he remembers that he's supposed to be holding still. "Lan Zhan!" he says, delighted. It's less than flattering how surprised he is that Lan Zhan is playing with him, but Wei Ying's gaze feels warm and good regardless.

"Why did you stop messaging?" he asks, even though it really is fine. He hadn't held a grudge against WY?, hadn't actually thought about him after a few days. He'd been disappointed, fine - but in the scope of his life's disappointments, being ghosted on a hookup app didn't rate very high. But he's never had the chance to ask before, what changes someone's mind. "What did you think was pointless?"

Wei Ying's smile falters. He tucks his chin into his chest, and without thinking Lan Zhan reaches around and puts him back in position. His fingertips push firmly for just a second into the soft, hot underside of Wei Ying's jaw, just long enough that he feels Wei Ying swallow before he jerks back.

His whole face feels hot. His ears are on fire. He's stunned that he did something like that. Lan Zhan doesn't touch anybody unless explicitly invited to, and he especially doesn't touch models. Being touched isn't a model's job. For a moment they just stand there,

saying nothing, as if what he did was fine and normal, and his breath doesn't feel wet and heavy in his lungs. Underneath his other hand, the one that hadn't left its place hovering over Wei Ying's back, he feels the other man shiver.

He looks up, an apology on his lips, but Wei Ying beats him to it.

"Raw, uneven hems on jeans," Wei Ying says, before Lan Zhan can say anything. He's blushing.

"What?" Lan Zhan asks. He's lost track of the moment. He feels hypnotized by the flush on Wei Ying's cheeks.

"They're just pointless," Wei Ying says. He twitches, like he wants to look over his shoulder again at Lan Zhan. They're standing very close together, their faces parallel. Lan Zhan wishes they were standing in front of the mirror, or even the windows, so he could fully see the expression on Wei Ying's face. At this angle, he doesn't look bothered that Lan Zhan touched him. He doesn't seem to mind at all. "What's the problem with nice finished hems?"

Lan Zhan licks his lips. He can't remember what they'd been talking about before WY? had vanished but he doesn't think it was fashion trends, and anyway Wei Ying's jeans this morning had been more holes than denim. "False pockets," he says anyway, testing.

Wei Ying laughs. "Very pointless," he agrees. His fingers flex at his side. "Midtown," he says, which is true, and Lan Zhan wants nothing more than to volley another joke to him, but suddenly the only joke Lan Zhan can think of is the truth, which is: *everything*.

The last pin is between Lan Zhan's teeth. He places it at the tip of where the dart will be and steps back, dragging air into his lungs. He says nothing. He taps Wei Ying's wrist, and then takes each shoulder seam between his fingers so that together they can peel Wei Ying out of the coat. He leaves it carefully on Miriam's desk. When he turns back, Wei Ying's hands are up over his head, stretching out his spine and arms. He's so very long, and there's so much bare skin, and Lan Zhan needs to get a hold of himself.

"Do you need a break?" he asks, looking anywhere else and failing:

from this angle he can see Wei Ying's face in the mirror. His eyes are closed, his mouth twitching.

"Yeah, please, if that's okay?" Wei Ying says, and then he reaches up and touches the place where Lan Zhan had touched him, his fingertips pressing beneath his jaw.

Lan Zhan's hands clench on nothing. He doesn't make any noise, but Wei Ying's eyes flash open and find Lan Zhan's in the mirror - and the expression on his face hooks Lan Zhan right in the stomach, like Wei Ying had reached inside him and pulled something out by the roots.

"Yes, fine," Lan Zhan says, and flees.

He takes the elevator down to the street. Comes out on the 33rd Street side, stands for a moment in the haze of cigarette smoke, car exhaust, grilled meat smoke from the halal cart on the corner, charred and sugary nuts, everything damp and unlovely and loud. He stands with his hands clenched into fists. After a few minutes he goes back up to the office, locks himself in the single stall bathroom that's closest to ORCHiD's suite of offices, and grimly masturbates to orgasm. Washes his hands and face afterwards, drying each carefully before his self-control breaks and he pulls his shirt over his head without even bothering to unbutton it.

His back is clean and dotted with itchy scabs and shiny, reddish patches of skin healing to scars. Unchanged from what it looked like this morning after his usual ritual.

He lets out a long, shaky breath. Puts his shirt back on. Washes his face again and dries it.

When he comes back to the office, his face firmly fixed, Wei Ying is sitting on one of the metal stools in front of Lan Zhan's desk, his long legs sprawled, frowning down at his phone. He's put his shirt back on but not his pants. He glances up when the door opens and moves as if to stand, but Lan Zhan's barely been gone ten minutes. He shakes his head, and walks behind his desk, leaving Wei Ying to finish up whatever he's doing. Miriam has sent two emails from the meeting, both in all caps. His brother has sent four, about nothing

in particular.

He knows Wei Ying is watching him. He can see from the corner of his gaze that Wei Ying's throat is flushed and his forehead is dotted with sweat. He looks like he was the one who'd gone and jerked off in the bathroom. Maybe he had. That was a nice thought.

He catches Wei Ying's eye accidentally, over his computer monitor. Wei Ying looks away immediately and then says, casually, his eyes on his phone, "I think I'll run downstairs and get some lunch. You hungry? Want me to pick you up something?"

So they're pretending nothing happened. That everything is fine. That suits Lan Zhan very well. Lan Huan had brought lunch for both of them. That was what one of his emails had been about. Leftovers from wherever he'd gone to dinner with Mingjue last night.

"Yes, I'm hungry," Lan Zhan says. He reaches for his handbag, pulls out his wallet. Hands Wei Ying ORCHiD's company card.

Wei Ying's smile does something mildly complicated, but he takes the card. "Your treat, Lan Zhan? Alright - you buy, I fly. Anything you're craving in particular?"

Lan Zhan's ears feel hot. "You can pick," he says.

Wei Ying pulls his jeans back on. He leaves his bag on the floor, his phone buzzing quietly inside of it. Alone in the room, Lan Zhan meets his own eyes in the reflection of his computer monitor.

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On Tuesday, Wei Ying is eight minutes late. He whirls in like a storm, blaming the subway. He's dressed in a cropped shirt and pair

of khaki overalls, one strap unbuttoned. He eyes Lan Zhan appreciatively and tells Miriam again how handsome he looks. Lan Zhan ignores it, though his ears feel hot again. He'd put a little effort in this morning, feeling somewhere halfway between hope and picking at a scab. It's one of his favorite dresses: high collar, no sleeves, knee length with a cloud patterned chiffon overlay that falls to his ankles. He wears pants underneath when he feels traditional, but he left his legs bare today. A pair of spiked Louboutin slip ons, for the contrast in texture. He'd spent some time standing with his back to the mirror, making sure that nothing strange was showing along the bare edges of his shoulders.

He's not expecting anything, exactly. After a sum total of eight hours in Wei Ying's presence he thinks the man flirts like breathing, like the way he smiles - unconsciously, and without ever thinking about it. He thinks there might be more teasing, more heated gazing, but after his initial comments about Lan Zhan's ethereal beauty (untouchable by the subway and the troubles of mere mortals), Wei Ying settles in the same way he did yesterday, as professional as ever.

The first garment that morning is a coat, light-weight nylon and nearly finished. Lan Zhan had used some yardage leftover from a previous collection to mock it up on a dummy last week, and had liked it so much that Miriam has already swapped out the gabardine originally specced out for this particular style. They've chosen it as one of the styles to present at tomorrow's meeting, so he has at least an hour of work to do on it after it comes off Wei Ying's body, to make it as perfect as possible without the sprawling embroidery that will be added during the factory sampling. And production, if Wen Qing allows - if the rest of the garment doesn't push costs up above whatever she deems acceptable. Switching from gabardine to nylon will save thirty cents a yard, but -

He lets out a harsh breath. He has his hair up in a fishtail braid today, and it blows the few wispy pieces he'd left out to frame his face. Why is he worrying about this now? It isn't his job, not really. Not anymore. When they were growing up, Lan Zhan's uncle would haggle for weeks with foreign buyers over a single yuan. A factory makes only two percent profit on average from the cost it takes to

purchase an item and get it out of the country, which is in itself only typically about ten percent of what the end customer will pay for the item at retail. That means an extra dollar to the factory is ten dollars more required from the customer's pocket, and though he's been told by everyone at Interwoven - by Lan Huan, too - to stop nagging other people about costing, it's a hard habit to break. A retailer will haggle as hard as Wen Qing does, and further threaten rebates, discounts, planned sales, right of return. They've had too much of those lately. He needs to be doing his part too.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Wei Ying asks. He comes to a stop in front of Lan Zhan, having completed another circuit around the studio.

"I don't know what that means," Lan Zhan tells him, watching the armhole seams as he moves.

"Oh," Wei Ying says, faltering. "I meant - you okay? You seem a little zoned out."

"I'm fine," Lan Zhan says. "Would you please turn?"

"For you?" Wei Ying asks. "Anything."

"Watch what you say," Lan Zhan says, amused despite himself.

Wei Ying throws a sly glance over his shoulder, and slides it all the way up and down Lan Zhan's body. "I am," he says.

Lan Zhan bites his lips together, moving more closely behind Wei Ying. From this distance Lan Zhan can smell him, sweat and body warmth and, invisible until he tilts his head to give Lan Zhan better access to his neck, the last ghost of cologne. "You grew up in New York?" Lan Zhan asks, before he does anything stupid like sink his teeth into Wei Ying's throat.

Wei Ying looks pleased that he remembered, as if that wasn't the first thing any native New Yorker will tell you about themselves. "Queens," he says. "All my life, I think."

"You think?"

Wei Ying scratches the side of his nose. The motion makes the glass buttons on his wrist sparkle in the slanting light. “My parents went back to China for a couple years when I was a baby, but I don’t remember it, so I don’t think it counts.” He laughs unexpectedly. “You look so excited! Why, do I remind you of someone back home?”

Lan Zhan moves behind Wei Ying, aware that he’s hiding his expression. “No,” he says. Maybe. Wei Ying reminds him of something, but he’s not sure what. “Have you been back since?”

Wei Ying shakes his head. The ends of his hair brush softly against Lan Zhan’s knuckles. “Too expensive,” he says mournfully. “No family there anymore, no one to stay with. I’d really love to take -” and he swallows, almost imperceptibly. “- some time doing it. Look up my parents’ old friends or something. Track down where they grew up. But who’s got the money for that, anyway.”

“Could you ask your parents?” Lan Zhan asks.

Wei Ying barks laughter. “For money?” He laughs harder.

“No,” Lan Zhan says. “About where they grew up.” He taps two fingers on Wei Ying’s shoulder. “Turn around, please.”

Wei Ying does. His grin is softer now. “They’re both dead, so I can’t ask them about anything,” he says. His tone is very frank.

“So are mine,” Lan Zhan admits. He drops his hands. “I’ll take the jacket off you now. The fit is good. I’ll finish the rest of it after you leave today.”

Wei Ying takes the piece off himself; it is almost finished, after all. No hanging seams, no dense thicket of pins. Just thin lines of chalk and a sharp metal bracelet around one wrist. He waits quietly as Lan Zhan drapes the jacket over his sewing machine, and returns with another nearly finished piece, another item for the morning’s presentation. “Tell me about Shanghai,” Wei Ying says, and holds out his hands, waiting for Lan Zhan to slip the shirt over his head. “I hear it’s really pretty. Great food. Beautiful people.”

Lan Zhan smiles. Wei Ying doesn't spot it until his head is through the neck of the shirt, and then his eyes widen. He smiles back. So Lan Zhan does. He tells Wei Ying about brick streets covered in thick trees, the school he and his brother had gone to as children, which had been a colonial mansion and then barracks and then a nightclub and then an elementary school. The neighborhood they'd lived in had been a dense concentration of pet shops, each hutong filled with stacks of tiny songbirds and heat-dazed little dogs, colorful plastic tubs swarming with turtles.

He tells Wei Ying about the night that he and Lan Huan decided to accept Interwoven's offer and move to America. The story leaves his mouth spare and concise, hardly more than *we went to the Bund for dinner and walked along the water afterwards*, but he remembers humidity, the clotted smell of the water, the dark curve of old Shanghai behind them, facing everything new and neon and glittering across the Huangpu River. When Lan Huan had said, "I think it's what she would want," Lan Zhan had blinked the colors away and said, "Okay."

"It sounds like you miss it," Wei Ying says.

Lan Zhan itches the back of his neck reflexively. He jerks a hand away when he realizes what he's doing, so fast that he scratches himself. He doesn't have an answer, even though Wei Ying sounds sympathetic. Of course he misses it. He misses the food and the night markets and being able to understand everything people are saying around him. He misses a lot of things. But what does it matter? What good does it do to miss anything?

He shakes his head. He reaches up and tugs his hair free from its tie, just in case.

There's a knock on the office door. It's Lan Huan, buttoned up. His hands go in his pockets as soon as he's through the threshold. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he says. He doesn't close the door behind him. "I just came to see if you were all set for tomorrow."

Lan Zhan nods. He holds a palm up towards Wei Ying, pantsless and covered in pins. "This is Wei Ying. Wei Ying, this is my brother."

“Stephen, right?” Wei Ying asks.

“Lan Huan,” Lan Zhan corrects.

Lan Huan shoots him an amused look, and the two shake hands. Wei Ying retrieves his phone and retires to one of the metal stools to wait.

The concept boards for Spring are stacked neatly against the wall where Lan Zhan doesn’t have to look at them. He pulls them out and lays them face up on the desk for his brother to pore over. Lan Huan says things like, “Very pretty,” and “I think they’ll like this one,” and, “Do you have an illustration we can use for this? Maybe one of your watercolors?”

“No,” Lan Zhan says. “But I can put something together tonight.”

“Good,” Lan Huan says. He takes his hands out of his pockets and crosses them over his chest. “So you’re ready?” he asks. Over his shoulder, Lan Zhan can see Wei Ying also peering at the concept boards. He catches Lan Zhan’s eye and winks.

Notes:

> There is now a book cover for this fic, made by my incredible editor Emiblake!! It's been added to the top of the fic and can be admired also on twitter.
>
> The amazing delonix_regia made fan art for the first chapter!! Please go check out here and here (it's also on tumblr if that's your preferred platform!

Chapter 3

Chapter Text

On Wednesday, the merchandise meeting.

It's a full sentence in Lan Zhan's head. A statement of fact. No elaboration needed. It's the first thing he thinks of when he opens his eyes. Lan Huan is sitting on the couch when he comes out of his room, curled around a mug of tea, his phone propped up on the coffee table. Meng Yao, JLT's factory manager, is on the little screen. He's turned away from the camera. It looks like he's making dinner. Lan Huan looks tired. They nod at each other across the living room, and Lan Zhan slips away to the bathroom.

He jerks off in the shower. He takes his time with it. It's the only moment he'll have to himself all day. Maybe for the rest of the week. He thinks about Wei Ying. The beads of sweat on his forehead, the thread of tension that they'd both let drop. The long stretch of his neck. His sprawled legs on Lan Zhan's chairs. How easy it would have been to kick Wei Ying's ankles further apart and take his cock into his mouth. He thinks of fucking Wei Ying over his desk, smearing their sweat across the glass - unable to imagine him in Lan Zhan's apartment, or what Wei Ying's apartment might look like, what the rest of his life looks like - and comes tugging roughly on his balls, tilting his face up into the water until he can barely breathe, until he can't think at all.

He washes come off the shower wall afterwards, dispassionately.

He wipes the bathroom mirror clean and examines himself. Only one today. The steam of the shower did something to it. It's grown since he woke up. The little curl of green next to his shoulder blade has lengthened, drooping, sprawling. It's turned orange. It looks more like a tangle of hair than a plant, and it's nearly the length of his forearm.

His breathing thickens as he reaches behind himself and up, looking

for purchase as close to his skin as possible. It hurts. He can feel roots grabbing at his muscle fibers nearly all the way down his back, fighting to stay where they are. It *hurts*. After a moment, he stuffs the heel of his hand into his mouth and bites down hard. He adjusts his grip each time he uproots another few centimeters, to stay close to the skin and the open wound he's created. His fingers feel slick. He can feel something trickling down his back. He should have done this before his shower, but he'd wanted - he'd -

When it's done he throws the plant into the sink and stands over it with his hands braced, breathing hard. His spine twitches through the aftershocks. His hips jerk forward. His fingers clench around the counter.

He's taken to keeping a roll of paper towels in the bathroom. He uses them to wipe his back clean. What's come out of him looks more like real blood every day. He rinses the plant clean, and for a moment just stands there and looks at it. There are leaves on it - barely more than little ridges, set in a spiral pattern around the vine. And there, at the tip: those might be buds.

If he left it, what would happen? How deep would these roots bury into him? How big would the vines grow? What would the flowers look like if he let them open?

He puts a wide bandage over the hole in his back. He puts the plant and the bloody paper towels into a plastic bag. It says THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING over and over in bright red letters. He folds his towel over the bag, hiding it completely. Lan Huan doesn't look up when he comes out of the bathroom, talking quietly to Meng Yao about what sounds, maybe, like the meeting they'll have today. Lan Zhan closes his bedroom door behind himself and puts the bag with the others.

A suit today. All over white and lace. Alexander McQueen, ready to wear, and well tailored, of course. The shirt underneath is one of ORCHiD's own, from the last collection they'd shown in Shanghai. Pale blue and gauzy, cowl-necked. He doesn't wear suits very often, but it feels right, and when he checks himself over in the mirror it looks right too. The shoulders could be a little sharper, but it will do. Maison Margiela tabi boots. The jade bracelet last of all, fragile

and cool feeling against his wrist.

Lan Huan is also wearing a suit today. They catch each other's eye in the elevator. Lan Zhan nods. Lan Huan smiles back.

"Do you want help setting up today?" he asks in the cab. The concept boards are stacked between them, the watercolor Lan Zhan had finished late last night rolled up into a tube and held carefully between his hands.

"No," Lan Zhan answers. "I know you have a lot to prepare." He looks sideways at his brother, slumped back against the seat. "I can help with the financial presentation. If you'd like."

Lan Huan opens his eyes. He's smiling. "You don't have to, A-Zhan."

"I know," Lan Zhan says.

"You'd have to explain it all in English."

"I know," Lan Zhan says, irritated.

Lan Huan's smile softens. He puts a hand on the cardboard tube next to Lan Zhan's hand, patting it as if it were his hand. "We'll be fine."

"You'd said," Lan Zhan says hesitantly. He can't finish the sentence, because Lan Huan hadn't said it to him, he'd said it to Meng Yao, and Lan Zhan had only overheard. Lan Huan looks at him curiously. Shoulders relaxed. His other hand soft over his stomach, rumpling his shirt. He doesn't look like he thinks ORCHiD is in danger.

"A-Zhan?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

Lan Zhan looks away.

Wen Qing is sitting alone in the conference room. There are half empty bottles of water littered across the table, empty paper cups still smelling of coffee. Her glass travel mug is still half full. She's typing furiously on her laptop. She's dressed the same as she ever is. She looks up when Lan Zhan opens the glass door, and groans.

There are six garment bags draped over Lan Zhan's arms. He hangs them carefully on the rack, slides into the seat across from her, folds his hands on the table, and waits.

Wen Qing rests her forehead against her knuckles for a brief moment. "Don't start with me," she warns. "It's too early for that."

Lan Zhan says nothing.

"You're early," she says. "There's still fifteen minutes, go dress your mannequins and let me finish my emails in peace."

"I want Yunshen for this collection," Lan Zhan says.

"Tough," Wen Qing says. Her fingers are still slamming over the keys, unhindered by his presence. Her phone lights up with a message, and she spares a moment to glance at it. The background of her phone is a photo of her holding a young child, both of them grinning into the camera. "Their production lines are booked through July. ORCHiD is going to JLT."

"JLT can't do high stretch materials," Lan Zhan says. He says it very evenly. They've had this discussion before. "They cut the fabric and don't let it rest long enough. Everything ends up skewed. They're not careful with open weave materials. I have four lace styles and two with Lycra."

"I'll talk to Meng Y -," Wen Qing says, and then sighs very deeply. Wen Qing uses her Chinese name only, and coldly rebukes any pouts and deliberate mispronunciations that the Americans make about it. "To *Treasure* about it. We'll schedule a pre production meeting to go over everything with Yinzhu and Jinzhu. Have

Miriam put a note in the specs. Yunshen is booked."

"If JLT does our production then I want one hundred percent QC inspection," Lan Zhan counters.

Wen Qing snorts. "It'll come out of your budget."

"Fine," Lan Zhan says.

She looks up at him, finally. "All of the styles? Or just the Lycra ones?"

"All of them," Lan Zhan says. "And JLT should share the cost with us."

"The returns from Summer weren't that bad," Wen Qing says, but her mouth twists. "Fine. I'll get a quote once the production quantities are finalized. You and your brother can duke it out with JLT."

"Don't ask BV," Lan Zhan says, and stands. "Their inspectors in Hangzhou don't have enough technical knowledge, and they take bribes." He adds, "Thank you."

"What'd you do to your hand?" she asks, gesturing.

Lan Zhan looks down. There's a deep bruise on the heel of his hand, where he'd bitten himself in the shower this morning. The bruise is in the shape of a ring of teeth. He tugs his sleeve down over it. "Nothing," he says, and goes to dress the mannequins.

Other people start to filter in. The smell of Keurig coffee and insufficient deodorant fills the room. Merchandise meetings aren't quite all-hands, but it's close: with Product Development and Design both presenting to upper management, Sales delivering forecasted order quantities, and Production grinding every rough edge off of their projections. Mingjue's team in Operations are the only ones allowed to skip out. Ultimately, it doesn't matter to Ops what gets shipped, but everyone else gets a vote.

Before Interwoven had bought ORCHiD, making changes had been as easy as having dinner with their uncle. But they'd only been

making a few dozen pieces of each style, with a limited range of sizes; Lan Zhan had never once placed a bulk order of dyed-to-match zippers or had to deal with using up three thousand yards of a minimum fabric order. As a brand scales up, the process and complexity of manufacturing scales up accordingly. If the country arrival date is fashion's horizon point, then the merchandise meeting is where the heading is decided, where the course is set.

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First, Lan Zhan presents the initial look at ORCHiD's Spring collection. At this point not much is expected or needed. Fashion is a scrying pool, seeking to gauge the mood of retail buyers and consumers nearly a full year in advance. In ten months or so, if all goes well, he will walk down Fifth Avenue to see his work in the windows of better department stores, merchandised in pretty displays with the price tags tastefully tucked away. Today their future is only moodboards, concept sketches, market research, a designer's whims: it never really takes long to go through. What happens is that Miriam puts all of the boards up on the wall and they both stand in front of them, and management asks, "What was your inspiration for these?" which is the question that Lan Zhan hates most in the world, more than any other.

"Water," is the answer this morning.

The people on the other side of the table exchange amused glances. "Straight to the point as ever, John," Michael says. His title is EVP of something that Lan Zhan can't remember, or at least can't distinguish from the titles other two men that sit in on these meetings, forming a bulwark of blandness and required approvals. EVP of Product, or EVP of Concept, or EVP of Forward Planning or EVP of Consumer Experience: the words feel featureless in his mind,

like there's a nuance of context there that his self-conscious English is failing to grasp. The other two men are named Paul and Brian. Brian makes jokes about other people's accents, though never in Wen Qing's presence. Paul never jokes at all.

Lan Huan grimaces at Lan Zhan. His face says, *and you wanted to help present the financials?* Lan Zhan's lips press together. "The East River," he offers. "As the sun rises. During a storm. At night when the Brooklyn Bridge shines in the water. The color and," he gropes for the right word, settles for, "shape. They are different every day. Forever changed. Changing."

"That's beautiful," Michael says, encouraging. "Wow. John, I love this. You surprise us every season." He extends his grace as far as Wen Qing's flat, worn-thin gaze. There are seven other brands under Interwoven Apparel, and they all keep to more or less the same retail calendar, though the three mass market brands ship more or less continually. Wen Qing has been in meetings for three solid days already, but she's sharp: her gaze flicks to the two silhouettes that Lan Zhan recycled from three seasons ago.

"Less handwork this time around, please," she says. Lan Zhan meets her eyes flatly, promising nothing.

"I think we've really got a winner here," Brian says. He gets up and goes to peer at the concept boards. Miriam inches backwards, grimacing. "You know, Pparel is doing a whole eco concept for Spring, you think we can tie into that? What do you think, Qing?"

Wen Qing tips her chin towards the ceiling, considering. "We've asked JLT to look into Oeko-tex certified materials for Pparel," she says. "If we bulk buy for ORCHiD at the same time and just save part of their greige goods for ORCHiD's production, that should be fine."

"Pparel retail is thirty percent less than ORCHiD," Lan Zhan says. "We cannot use the same materials."

Lan Huan's fingers drum once along the conference table. He asks, "Can we see the fabrics they're using before making a decision?"

Wen Qing nods, not looking at Lan Zhan. “I’ll send you an Outlook invite,” she says. “You’ve got a week to decide, they’re going into production a bit before you.”

Lan Huan looks hard at Lan Zhan.

“Fine,” Lan Zhan says, after a moment.

“JLT also just closed out their WRAP certification,” Wen Qing says.

“I want Yunshen,” Lan Zhan says.

“They can’t pass the audit,” Wen Qing says, and then amends, “The eco audit, I know the social compliance stuff is fine. But that building is crumbling. Yunshen’s water filtration system is a joke. That warehouse roof is going to blow right off the next time a typhoon gets that far up north.”

Brian laughs. “Good thing we’ve got JLT!” he says. Neither Lan Zhan or Lan Huan say anything. “I don’t know what we’d do without them. That’d probably make your job a lot harder, right, Qing?”

Wen Qing rolls her eyes. “Let’s get into Resort,” she says.

Lan Zhan sits down. Miriam remains standing, hovering at his shoulder, moving mannequins as needed as they go through the final line selections, start sketching out a budget for bulk production. “We have another three weeks before we need to pull the trigger, right?” Lan Huan asks, his eyes on his laptop screen.

“That’s pushing it,” Wen Qing says.

Lan Huan grimaces. “Please,” he says. “Ask JLT to save capacity for us as long as they can. I have a meeting with Neiman next Tuesday, I’d like to offer them two exclusive styles.”

“I have a call scheduled with Treasure to go over the WIP report tonight, and your Fall reorders,” Wen Qing says, shrugging. She doesn’t seem to notice the way the members of the ORCHiD team all tense. “I can ask him about it then, unless you want to talk to him yourself.”

Lan Huan blinks at her. “Reorders?” His voice is tight. “We didn’t put in for that.”

“Just some additional units,” Paul says.

“We’re sold through already?” Lan Zhan asks.

Paul doesn’t look at him. “Vogue wants the backpack for an ad campaign,” Michael says. “We’re ordering extra in anticipation of a bump there.”

“You’re only re-ordering the backpack?” Lan Zhan asks.

Michael shrugs. “A few other styles.” He laughs.

Lan Zhan looks at his brother, waiting for him to say something. Miriam is standing stiffly at his shoulder, probably waiting for the same - for Lan Huan to tell them, no. No, we can’t take additional units. Not after you cut ORCHiD’s budget because of overstock from the Summer collection. Not after we were told things were too tight to show at Fashion Week. Not after we fought so hard to limit the production orders to what had already been sold.

Brian laughs too. “Time to hustle, Stephen!”

Lan Huan smiles, but he doesn’t laugh, and he doesn’t say anything at all.

-

Later, he finds Wen Qing in the break room, glaring blankly at the electric kettle she’d brought in from home, angry with how the Keurig machine made her tea taste. He’d come in search of more hot water himself, and for a moment they stand shoulder to

shoulder in a baleful, companionable silence.

“I didn’t know about your guys’ excess inventory problem,” she says eventually.

Lan Zhan presses his lips together. Of course not. It’s not her job to know. Once the goods leave China, they’re not her problem anymore. The same way it’s not supposed to be Lan Zhan’s problem either. Just Lan Huan’s. “It’s too late to cancel the reorders,” he says. “The materials have already been ordered. If we cancel now JLT will just bill us for the cost of the raw materials, or use them in someone else’s production.”

Wen Qing chews on her lip. “If you guys are having budget problems, then why do you want a hundred percent inspection? That’s so expensive.”

The electric kettle clicks. Lan Zhan moves to lift it out of its cradle. He refills her glass mug first, then his own. “I am very tired of JLT’s quality problems,” he says without looking at her. “The new product has to be perfect. We can adjust the budget to make sure of that.”

“Your funeral,” she says. “I’ll get you a regular AQL quote too, just in case.” She chews her lip more.

Lan Zhan waits, inhaling steam. Then she asks, “Hey, how is Wei Ying? Is he doing a good job?”

Lan Zhan blinks at her, his heart abruptly beating loud in his chest. It’s not at all what he’d expected her to say. “Good,” he says. “Was it you who recommended him for the job?” She nods, shrugs. “Do you - know each other well?”

“Too well,” she mutters.

He has no idea what to say to that. He says, “Hm.”

She looks up at him. She’s a full head shorter than he is. Her long red fingernails drum against her mug. “Never mind,” she says. “I’m just - concerned.”

“For me?” Lan Zhan asks. She shakes her head. “For him?”

She looks away. Lan Zhan looks away too.

“He’s - very good at his job,” he offers, after a moment. “It’s been good to work with him. If I can, I will ask him to come back next season as well.”

It’s faint praise compared to everything else he thinks: how smart Wei Ying is. How attractive he is, to Lan Zhan. Half of his thoughts are unintelligible, and the other half unprofessional. But her face relaxes regardless. Her nails stop clicking against the glass.

“Good,” she says. “Good.”

-

On Thursday, Lan Zhan wakes early. His eyes feel dry. His mouth and jaw feel sore. His chest and stomach both feel like he was punched, over and over. He stumbles bleary-eyed to the kitchen, pulls one of Lan Huan’s flavored seltzers out of the refrigerator, and drinks the entire thing in three long swallows. Afterwards he finds himself, startled, to be sitting on the kitchen floor - his legs sprawled ungracefully, his foot pressed against the opposite cabinet, the empty soda can at the tips of his numb fingers.

His back digs into the refrigerator. There’s a sharp pain at the base of his neck, where he’s pressing on something growing.

Lan Huan finds him there, some unknown time later. He’s dressed like he’s come back from the gym, a little towel around his neck, an empty water bottle in his hand. He and Lan Zhan stare at each other in silent surprise, and then Lan Huan reaches down a hand and helps Lan Zhan up.

“Oh, A-Zhan,” he says. “Again?”

Lan Zhan goes to sit on one of the kitchen stools, gripping the counter the whole way. He reaches up and pats the back of his neck, suddenly afraid that whatever’s grown during the night isn’t covered by his hair.

Lan Huan is watching him, dismayed. “Are you okay?”

After a moment he comes and sits next to Lan Zhan, whose shoulders draw up close to his ears automatically. Hesitates. Reaches towards him. Freezes when Lan Zhan flinches for real. Moves his hand away. Settles both of them on the white countertop, where Lan Zhan can see them.

He asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Lan Zhan blinks down at both their hands, spread out along the cold surface in the same way. Shakes his head.

He sleepwalks through the morning. Every step, out of his apartment, through the subway, up and into Midtown, feels like it’s half a step off. The vine at the base of his neck had been bent and broken off in his hand when he’d tried to pull it out, and he’d had to sit silently in front of the bathroom mirror for a long time, staring at nothing, before he could pull himself together enough to get the x-acto blade to cut it out. At least the roots had been shallow.

“You’re quiet today,” Wei Ying says.

They’re starting late. Not because of Wei Ying, but because of Lan Zhan. The agenda he wrote for himself doesn’t make any sense. The first garment he gave to Wei Ying to try on was a pair of pants that they’d already reviewed together.

Lan Zhan’s neck hurts. “How can you tell,” he grits out.

Wei Ying laughs, but it’s a sympathetic sound. How humiliating. Can Miriam tell how out of sorts Lan Zhan is? Could Paul, EVP of Whatever, smell blood when he’d said good morning to Lan Zhan in the hall?

“Was the merchandise meeting that rough?” Wei Ying asks, after a moment. He picks at the hem of the jacket he’s wearing, waiting for Lan Zhan to give him some direction about it. In the corner, Miriam gives a gusty sigh.

“They’re always rough,” she says. She doesn’t even look up at them, deep in spec sheet hell. “My brain’ll be mush for the rest of the week.”

“I told you to take the day off,” Lan Zhan tells her.

She makes a face at him and gestures to her computer screen. “I’ll take the day off when these are done and I don’t ever have to look at them again,” she says.

Lan Zhan nods. “August,” he says.

She puts her head down on the desk and groans. “They liked the new stuff, at least,” she says, muffled into her arms. “For once.”

“Our feedback is always positive,” Lan Zhan says. He’d like to bury his face in his arms also. He goes instead to retrieve the jacket from Wei Ying’s shoulders. Even the flushed skin of Wei Ying’s throat is barely appealing this morning. He thinks longingly of the iced coffee Wei Ying had brought in last week, the trickle of cold in his chest, the slick condensation on his fingertips.

“A ringing endorsement,” Wei Ying says, grinning. He adds in Chinese, a little more softly, “Don’t worry, you look as handsome as ever.”

Lan Zhan blows air through his nose. He walks back to the garment rack. He can’t remember the order of things. What he’d wanted to do next. He stands next to it, staring at the densely-packed, hanging garments. The sum of months of work. Years, really.

Wei Ying is standing next to him. He’d come around the desk when Lan Zhan wasn’t looking, and is standing quite close, his hands tucked behind his back. “Hey, for real,” he says, very quietly. “Are you okay?”

Lan Zhan hates being asked that. Always has. But -

He risks a glance. Wei Ying isn't looking at him. His gaze is lowered, his eyes on the garment rack as well. He reaches out two fingers and delicately snags the edge of a sleeve, twitches it to one side to look at the detailing. His body is turned a little towards Lan Zhan. Not so much that he's boxed him in against the clothing and the filing cabinet and his desk, but - covering him, almost. When Lan Zhan shifts his weight Wei Ying does the same, maintaining a careful distance.

If he said, "I'm fine," would Wei Ying push? Would he crowd closer to Lan Zhan? Distract him with jokes? Touch him, maybe? On his shoulder or arm or on his back. The places people usually touch, when they comfort a person. What if he touched the raw, bandaged place at the base of Lan Zhan's neck?

He says nothing. The words catch in his throat. At the edges of his vision, Wei Ying's fingers trace along unfinished hems. After a moment, he leans over and bumps his shoulder against Lan Zhan's. Not hard, but he's not expecting it, so it rocks him a little on his feet, and the momentum on the way back presses his shoulder more firmly against Wei Ying's.

It's warm outside today - warm in the office too. Lan Zhan is wearing only a lightweight cotton button up, printed with a sumi-e style illustration of a rabbit. Wei Ying's shirt is sleeveless. They touch only for a moment, not even skin to skin.

And just as quickly, it's over. Wei Ying shifts back, moves away. Back to a respectable, professional distance. Lan Zhan can feel every centimeter of it, prickling over his skin. He should have said something. Wei Ying is talking again - a steady buzz of words. Compliments. Of course they'd like the new stuff, the new stuff is beautiful. Lan Zhan still isn't saying anything. It's all very elegant. At least the sketches Wei Ying had seen the other day, that was the stuff you guys presented, right? Spring. Oscar red carpet level shit. You're really talented, Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan inhales shakily. He looks up and catches Wei Ying's eye. Wei Ying smiles at him - not big, but soft. Lan Zhan licks his lips and looks away. Finds, finally, a way to unlock his jaw. "You can see more, if you'd like," he offers. Oh, he's so awkward. "My

sketchbook is on the desk. Nothing is finished, but. You can look."

Wei Ying lights up. "I will," he says, and mercifully turns away. The space between Lan Zhan's desk and the garment rack isn't large - he likes the penned in feeling, of being surrounded on all sides, close enough to smell the inks and paints left to dry - but Wei Ying moves far enough away that Lan Zhan can breathe a little better, less aware of the exact shape of him. Lan Zhan allows himself the moment. Reaches both hands out and pushes them gingerly between the hanging garments. The fabric feels cool on his hands and wrists. Even the faint scratch of embroidery and sequins feels like home. He knows that Wei Ying is still standing behind him. He can hear the man leafing through the sketchbook that Lan Zhan had left in the pile on his desk, flipping back and forth between pages.

"Wow," Wei Ying says. "These are really cool, Lan Zhan. I thought it was Oscar red carpet, but you're going for more of a Met Gala vibe, huh? I dig it, very funky."

Lan Zhan's head jerks up. His heart, just beginning to settle, starts flopping wildly in his chest again. Wei Ying's hip is propped up against Lan Zhan's desk; he's scratching his ankle with the socked toes of his other foot. The sketchbook he's flipping through is blue, not red.

"That's not," he says. Wei Ying twists to look at him. "That's my personal sketchbook."

"Oh," Wei Ying says, a little uncertain. "Is it okay that I look at it?"

He meets Lan Zhan's eyes. Across the room, Miriam shifts at her chair, not paying them any attention at all. A faint baseline leaks out of her headphones. "Yes," Lan Zhan says. Very consciously, he lets his hands hang at his sides.

He thinks Wei Ying will go back to looking through the sketchbook - his fingers are poised to turn the page - but instead for a long moment he just looks at Lan Zhan, with a look on his face that Lan Zhan has no way of interpreting. It's not quite a smile, though he is smiling. Eventually, Wei Ying does turn the page. He looks through the work Lan Zhan never really meant to show anyone, giving each

page serious consideration.

“Yeah,” he says, mostly to himself, stopping at a particularly fanciful design Lan Zhan had actually colored with watercolor pencils, smeared with condensation collected on his fingertips from a glass of sparkling water. “Yeah, this is really cool. Really different. There’s a lot of, ummm, you know, personality in these. Like you know exactly who designed it.” He moves through a few pages without comment, and stops again.

“Where is this?” he asks.

Lan Zhan steps a little closer to see. It’s an illustration of a tree, hemmed in by gray walls. Grass grows around the gnarled, lumpy roots. Vines hang here and there from the branches. Thick rolls of fabric are piled haphazardly around, each a different color and pattern - leaned up against the wall or the trunk of the tree, age and rain and the seasons slumping them against each other. Like a few other pages here and there, it’s fully colored. There’s soft, furred mold on some of the rolls, added with green pencil. Garbage litters the roots, the gleam of plastic peeking through dense grass.

“It’s Yunshen,” Lan Zhan says, after a moment. He doesn’t remember painting it. “My family’s factory. I grew up there.”

Wei Ying’s fingers brush against the edge of the illustration. It’s bright in the room - so bright that Lan Zhan imagines, for a moment, color bouncing off the page and onto Wei Ying’s fingertips. He sees Wei Ying’s lips part -

Surprising himself, Lan Zhan speaks first. He says what he didn’t say to his brother his morning. Hadn’t needed to say. Hadn’t been asked. He says, “I had a nightmare.” Wei Ying looks up at him. His mouth hangs open a little, foolish looking. “That’s all. Thank you for your concern.” It’s hard not to flinch when he hears himself speak. He sounds unbearably sincere.

“Hah, sure,” Wei Ying says, a little inanely. “Yeah, nightmares are the worst. You should try and get some rest tonight. Don’t worry, I’ll try not to be a pain today.”

Lan Zhan's mouth twitches. He looks away before he can say anything else, and as his eyes back roam over the garment rack he remembers, finally, what he'd wanted to review next.

At the other end of the room, Miriam heaves a deep and agonized sigh, and drops her head onto her keyboard. "Maybe I *will* take tomorrow off," she mumbles into it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Text

On Friday, Lan Zhan wakes early. Finds a cluster of vines growing in the small of his back. Five of them this morning, so fine he ends up pulling them out with tweezers, groping carefully across the parts of his skin that he can't see in the mirror. They leave tiny sucking holes behind, spaced just far enough apart that he has to smooth five small band-aids over them. He dreamed of nothing, or at least remembers nothing. The air feels clean and fresh on his face when he leaves their apartment building. He can smell water on the wind.

His feet turn towards the subway and then push him past. He walks through Foley Square, thinking of nothing in particular. The streets are crowded in a way that makes them feel empty, the squeak of shoes and rustle of clothing and the muted sound of voices swallowed up by the big, echoing space. He walks. He walks. His feet find familiar streets. The ladies at Lung Moon Bakery still remember him. They laughingly shout hello to their most handsome customer. The closest starts piling egg tarts into a box before he even asks for them.

"Can I have, ah," Lan Zhan says, surveying the pastry case. "Half a dozen sesame balls. Two pork and cabbage steamed buns. One lotus paste and one egg?"

"A batch of sponge cakes came out of the oven a few minutes ago," she says, shamelessly upselling.

"Four of those, then, thank you, auntie," Lan Zhan says absently. "Oh, is there pork floss?"

He eats the salted egg steamed bun as he walks, tidily, taking care not to let the filling spill out. Thin plastic handles dig into the pads of his fingers, box stuffed full of airy pastries. Around him bodies spill out of subway entrances and into buildings, coffee shops, wait

impatiently at carts for cold bagels. The walk from Mulberry and Canal to Midtown is about an hour. The sun warms Lan Zhan's shoulders as he walks: up Mulberry, crossing Bleeker, and over to Broadway, the smells and sounds changing block by block.

He unlocks the front door of Interwoven Apparel. Leaves the sesame balls on Wen Qing's desk. The sponge cakes for Mingjue and his team. He sends an email to his brother to let him know about the steamed buns. He sits down at his desk, facing the concept boards for Spring, now tacked up against the wall for easy reference.

After a moment, he slides the blue sketchbook towards himself across the desk. Flips it open, past cityscapes and quick sketches of people lying on blankets in Central Park. He looks through the design illustrations critically, contemplative. He'd done them without a croquis underneath, so the proportions are wild, and many of the designs are impractical, even just considering ORCHiD's price point. ORCHiD is a luxury brand, of course, but they're not Oscar de la Renta. The brand is ready to wear, hardly couture. Still - there was potential here. Personality. Vision, Interwoven's management usually calls it. That's what they'd said when they'd first approached Lan Huan to buy the brand. That ORCHiD had vision.

The sketches Lan Zhan had done for himself were far less commercial than the direction approved during the merchandising meeting, but - he likes them. Wei Ying was right. They are cool.

He tears out a few pages. Walks around his desk and pins them up over the concept boards he'd presented at the merchandise meeting. Goes back and sits behind his desk and looks at his work. He doesn't really notice - still sunk deeply in the kind of quiet you can only find in the middle of a crowd - but there, on his face, very faint, is a smile, tucked into the corner of his mouth like something about to unfurl.

At nine fifty five, Lan Zhan goes to the break room, wraps three of the steamed buns in paper towels, and puts them in the microwave. Even when he puts them carefully back in their waxed paper box, the sweet smell of them fills his office. When Wei Ying walks through the door at ten oh three, two iced coffees in a tray in one hand, he stops dead and slaps his other hand over his heart.

“Um,” he says. “It smells amazing in here, what -?”

Lan Zhan flips open the box like a magic trick, enjoying the way Wei Ying’s eyes widen. “There are egg tarts also,” he says.

“Oh,” Wei Ying says softly. It’s almost a moan. He reaches for the lotus paste bun first, hesitates, asks, “Really?” Lan Zhan hands him a napkin, and accepts an iced coffee in return.

Wei Ying closes his eyes as he eats, a little theatrical about it, as if he’s in a commercial. “Don’t make this a habit or you’ll fuck up my measurements,” he warns.

“Okay,” Lan Zhan lies, resting his chin contentedly on his knuckles.

Wei Ying eats the pork floss bun as well, and three egg tarts. By the time Lan Huan comes by to claim his pork and cabbage buns, they’re crouched together over a pair of wide legged trousers. Only one of the legs is actually on Wei Ying’s body, and Wei Ying is laughing so hard that he’s got tears in his eyes. Lan Zhan doesn’t even notice his brother standing in the doorway. Wei Ying spots him first, says, “Oh,” and nudges Lan Zhan’s shoulder with the backs of two fingers.

Lan Zhan straightens but doesn’t stand. “Good morning,” he says. Lan Huan nods, but he isn’t looking at them; his attention is up on the wall, looking intently over the new sketches that Lan Zhan had pinned there.

“These aren’t,” he says tentatively, in English, even though Lan Zhan had greeted him in Chinese, “what was shown in the meeting,

right? Did you decide to change directions?"

There's a tone there, threaded in at the edges of his brother's voice. "Yes," Lan Zhan says.

He stands and comes over to his brother's side, staring thoughtfully up at the new sketches as if they were in a gallery. "I like them better," Lan Zhan tells him. In English, to match. The language feels strange in his mouth. He hardly ever speaks English to Lan Huan, even when they're at work. Only when they're in meetings with management. The first few months after they'd come to New York, Brian would make a joke out of it in a way that very much was not a joke: that the Lan brothers liked to keep secrets. Lan Huan's English is better than Lan Zhan's and always has been - but even four years ago, before he was forced every day to get better at it, he understood that English was required, for specific situations.

He glances away from Lan Huan for just a moment, to where Wei Ying has bent his neck over his phone, curled neatly on the drop cloth Lan Zhan spreads out for fittings. He's folded the sample pants neatly over a chair. He's giving Lan Zhan and his brother space to talk, not paying them any attention. It's an odd choice to speak in English, and it feels odder still when Lan Huan leans close and switches out of it, says softly in Chinese, "We need this collection to sell, A-Zhan. It's really important that it does well."

Lan Zhan looks at him. Lan Huan looks resolutely at the sketches, his arms folded around his waist. "It will," Lan Zhan says, matching him again in volume and language. He must not remember that Wei Ying speaks Chinese as well. "These are strong designs." Adds, uncertainly, "Don't you think so?"

Lan Huan blinks a few times, very rapidly. He looks tired. Lan Zhan hadn't seen him this morning; hadn't seen him yesterday either except that moment in the kitchen, when Lan Zhan had flinched away.

Lan Huan turns and looks him square on, and smiles. "If you think so, then I do too," he says firmly. His hand twitches on his waist, as if he's about to reach out and pat Lan Zhan on the shoulder, maybe, or on the top of his head, the way he used to when they were both

very young.

He doesn't do either of these things. He leaves with the last two steamed buns in hand, closing the door behind himself. For a moment Lan Zhan only stands there, staring at the wall and his sketches, trying to see what his brother saw.

"You okay?" Wei Ying asks.

"Yes," Lan Zhan says quickly. He can't see anything. The collection looks good to him. It sings with possibilities.

Wei Ying picks himself off the floor, flinging both arms up into the air in a long, luxurious-looking stretch, one hand wrapped around his other wrist. He's still wearing the shirt he arrived in: a bright red button up, loose and blousy through the shoulders, nipped in tight below the elbow. Womenswear, going by the length of it - it rises as he leans back in a yoga-like pose, bearing a paler stretch of skin just above the waistband of his underwear. Lan Zhan looks at that strip of skin pensively, his fingers flexing against his own ribs.

"Hmm," Wei Ying says, wincing into his stretch.

"Do you need a break?" Lan Zhan asks. He looks at the clock above the door; it's after lunch time. Lan Zhan had ordered delivery for both of them, and they'd eaten sitting on opposite sides of Lan Zhan's drafting table - one of the only tidy spaces in the studio, since he prefers to drape patterns whenever possible.

"Nah," Wei Ying says, dropping his arms. "Let's power through. We've only got two pieces to go, right?"

Lan Zhan looks at the garment rack, surprised. Thinks of all the notes on his calendar, the deadlines calculated backwards and forwards. JLT is already churning through the styles Lan Zhan has approved so far. He's had two late night conference calls with Jinzhu and Yinzhu, the sample makers; Meng Yao fills his inbox with approval requests for custom trims, tracking numbers for fabric strike offs. Initial costing for six styles has been delivered to Production. So far Lan Zhan has only hunkered down in the emails' cc line, watching Wen Qing and Meng Yao duke it out.

Echoing his thoughts, Wei Ying says, “That’s it for the first round, yeah?” He laughs. “You and I are all done until the next samples come in a couple weeks. It’ll be so quiet in here without me chattering in your ear all day while you try and get proper work done! Will you miss me?”

Flustered into honesty, Lan Zhan answers, “Yes.”

Wei Ying’s smile falters. His eyebrows twitch together in surprise. He’s sweating a little, even in the air conditioned room: just little beads around his hairline. He hasn’t looked away from Lan Zhan. Abruptly, the silence has weight.

Lan Zhan turns away, goes for the garment rack to give himself a little cover. What’s even left? A skirt and a pair of shorts. Simple things that he’d left for last, that won’t take more than an hour of their time. The shorts tie at the waist, which fits loosely - meant to be gathered into a cute little package when worn. His hands brush over each garment, undecided, and then he unclips the skirt from its hanger and hands it over to Wei Ying. Only the waistband and length to worry about, really - the finished product will be a tubular knit, with no side seams to speak of.

Wei Ying shimmies the skirt up over his narrow hips. He’s grinning, his eyes lowered like he’s telling himself a joke. Even so, Lan Zhan assumes he’ll drop it - pretend like nothing happened, the way they had on Wei Ying’s first day. Instead, Wei Ying says, “That’s so sweet of you, Lan Zhan! What will you miss most? My incredibly funny jokes? My handsome face? My confident runway walk?”

“Stop,” Lan Zhan mutters. His ears feel hot.

“My devastating technical skill,” Wei Ying says decisively. Lan Zhan watches him tuck the hem of his red shirt into the waist of the skirt. “I knew it. It’s where we really vibe, isn’t it, Lan Zhan?”

“Hm,” Lan Zhan says, refusing to give him the satisfaction. The skirt looks good but it is, ultimately, simple in construction. He circles Wei Ying thoughtfully, trying to ignore the chatter - are you saying we *don’t* vibe, Lan Zhan? That’s so hurtful - and the heat prickling in his shoulders and belly. He understood the look on Wei Ying’s

face well enough, a few moments ago - that stunned, considering expression. He can feel the thread of tension between them. But he'd felt it the first day too, had seen Wei Ying look him up and down, unmistakably - and then get on with the job that he was hired to do.

He feels dizzy. The flush of satisfaction he'd felt watching Wei Ying eat now feels diffused, scattered, uncertain.

Then he hears Wei Ying say, "Oh, you have a scratch," and the other man's fingers brush over the back of his neck.

Lan Zhan reacts without thinking: he grabs Wei Ying's wrist and pulls it away from his neck. Wei Ying staggers forward half a step, dragged closer to Lan Zhan. They blink at each other, equally startled. Immediately, consumingly, Lan Zhan's neck itches. His breath comes short through his nose. It's the first time Wei Ying has touched *him* rather than the other way around. He's still got his fingers wrapped around Wei Ying's wrist.

"It looks pretty bad," Wei Ying says. His voice is very steady. His fingers are twitching. Lan Zhan can feel the echo of it in the cords of his wrist. "Does it hurt?"

"No," Lan Zhan says.

"What'd you do?" Wei Ying asks. "Did a cat get you?"

"No," Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying's expression is searching. "Oh," he says.

Slowly, Lan Zhan brings Wei Ying's hand up to his mouth. His grip is very loose now. Wei Ying watches him do it, his eyes wide and fascinated. He blinks hard when Lan Zhan's lips press against his wrist. He breathes out, slow and shaky, when Lan Zhan opens his mouth and bites down, sinking his teeth into the soft juncture just under Wei Ying's thumb. Just hard enough to make it a promise.

"Oh," Wei Ying says again, barely more than a breath. His eyes are very wide. He's blushing. Lan Zhan watches as his pupils dilate, swallowing up the brown. "Okay."

Lan Zhan asks, muffled around the bite, “Okay?”

Wei Ying nods. “Okay.”

Lan Zhan lets him go. Steps away. Looks Wei Ying up and down. His shoulders are up, but it doesn’t seem - defensive. He’s watching Lan Zhan with ready interest, waiting to see what he’ll do next, his dark eyes bright like a bird’s. He watches Lan Zhan cross the studio and lock the door. Watches as he comes back, right into Wei Ying’s space, as if he means to crowd Wei Ying back against the wall - and then doesn’t.

Wei Ying smiles. And then, slowly, holding Lan Zhan’s eyes, reaches forward and hooks one finger into Lan Zhan’s belt loop, and draws him the rest of the way in. The kiss is aggressive. Hungry. Wei Ying tastes like the coffee he was drinking and then nothing at all, just slick saliva, and he *talks* almost the whole time, whenever he gets a chance to. He says things like, “Fuck, you’re so hot,” and “I felt crazy when I walked in here the first day,” and “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about your mouth,” and “Shit, *yeah*, right there, god that feels good.” Lan Zhan probably should have expected all the talking. Should have expected the way that Wei Ying would *writhe* under him, his whole body pushing up against Lan Zhan’s, his hands dipping under Lan Zhan’s shirt and over his chest and down over his cock, so quickly that he feels dizzy with it, astonished. It’s been so long since he’s felt anticipation. Since he’s let a moment build and build until it hurts. He’s wanted Wei Ying since the day he walked into Lan Zhan’s studio and apparently he was wanted back. The satisfaction is visceral, bone deep. He feels it in his guts the same way he feels Wei Ying gasping and moaning into his mouth, so responsive even though they’re just grinding on each other through their clothes. It makes Lan Zhan feel crazy too.

Wei Ying’s back hits the wall. Sketch paper and fabric cuttings shiver around him. Lan Zhan yanks Wei Ying’s skirt up. It makes a tube around his waist, absurd looking. He puts one hand on Wei Ying’s hip to hold him down, and the other on his cock, rubbing it lightly through his thin black underwear. Wei Ying’s fingers dig into his shoulders, and it hurts - he must be pressing on a scab or something, maybe even the scratch he’d pointed out on Lan Zhan’s neck, but even the bright line of pain feels right.

“Jesus,” Wei Ying pants in his ear. He’s *laughing*. He laughs during sex. His mouth keeps the shape of it even as he kisses Lan Zhan, wet and open and filthy. “Yes, that, shit, please touch me, Lan Zhan, I haven’t done this in so long, I don’t really do stuff like this,” and then he laughs for real, wrapping both arms around Lan Zhan and crushing them together. He’s strong. Lan Zhan likes that. Lan Zhan likes all of this. He says, grinning, his teeth hard against Lan Zhan’s mouth, “Tell me you’ll still respect me in the morning.”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan answers, even though he thinks Wei Ying is only joking. He sounds breathless even to himself. Their hips are squeezed together, with Lan Zhan’s hand trapped between them. His knuckles grind against his own cock. God, he wants to fuck Wei Ying. He’s thought a lot about fucking Wei Ying. Up against the big glass windows or over his desk. He might have condoms and lube with him. He usually does. But he also has a four o’clock meeting, and coworkers who stop by the studio all the time looking for him. They don’t have time for that. He asks instead, “Can I suck you off?”

Wei Ying claps a hand over his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut. He moans through his own fingers, nodding vigorously. It’s all very dramatic. If Lan Zhan was the kind of person who laughed during sex, he probably would laugh. “Yes,” Wei Ying pants, muffled. “Please, please suck me off, I would love that.”

Lan Zhan drops to his knees. Peels Wei Ying’s underwear carefully down his hips. He has a good cock, thin and long like the rest of him, flushed and dark. He doesn’t trim his pubic hair, and it trails soft and sparse down the inside of his thighs. He feels good in Lan Zhan’s mouth. He tastes clean, earthy for a moment and then like nothing at all, like spit and precome, not bitter or salty. His hips fuck little circles into Lan Zhan’s mouth - not so strong as to be deliberate, but like he’s helpless not to. It’s a heady feeling, so Lan Zhan lets him do it. Moves his hands from Wei Ying’s legs up to his thighs, pulling, encouraging, until Wei Ying gets it and starts fucking his face for real. His fingers are cupped around Lan Zhan’s skull, tangled in his hair tightly enough that it pulls as he thrusts. It’s good. It’s so good. Why doesn’t he do this all the time? Why doesn’t he fuck people he likes?

“Of course you’re good at this,” Wei Ying groans, still trying to smother himself behind his hand. “Oh god, have mercy, shit, you’re gonna make me come sucking me like that,” even though Lan Zhan isn’t sucking, not really, just holding himself at the right angle, his jaw open and relaxed, swirling his tongue around the head of Wei Ying’s cock whenever he pulls back enough to allow the movement. Wei Ying isn’t fucking him so roughly that he couldn’t breathe through it, but he lets it happen anyway, doesn’t try to breathe through his nose - lightheaded and enjoying it. “Lan Zhan, can I,” he says, and Lan Zhan taps his fingers against Wei Ying’s hip to say *yes, please come in my mouth,* and Wei Ying does.

Lan Zhan swallows it, runs his tongue along the length of Wei Ying’s cock one last time, and then pulls off. The muscles in Wei Ying’s thighs are shaking. His whole body is shaking. His face is very red. His throat glistens with sweat. Lan Zhan feels extremely pleased with himself, and also extremely turned on. After a moment Wei Ying slides down the wall and onto his knees. He pulls Lan Zhan to him again and kisses the taste of his come out of Lan Zhan’s mouth. “Lan Zhan, let me,” he mumbles against Lan Zhan’s lips, and together they undo Lan Zhan’s belt and open his pants, and he pulls his own underwear down below his balls while Wei Ying finally, finally touches his cock.

“Is it good?” Wei Ying asks. “Does it feel good? You’re so wet. You get so wet.”

He does; not every time, but he’s so turned on right now that he feels stupid with it. His cock is dripping down the back of Wei Ying’s knuckles. His long fingers smear it all over Lan Zhan’s cock and then grip him firmly, confidently. It’s not the most elegant handjob Lan Zhan’s ever received, but it’s good - Wei Ying filling the air with dirty nonsense, whispering it practically into Lan Zhan’s mouth, his face bright and interested, every part of his attention pinning Lan Zhan in place. He pulls Lan Zhan towards orgasm with a focus that Lan Zhan’s never felt before, so intense that it *hurts* until abruptly it doesn’t.

“There we go,” Wei Ying murmurs. “God, that’s good, you’re so good.”

Lan Zhan gulps air. His forehead presses against Wei Ying's. His knees are between Wei Ying's knees. Slowly, the world pieces itself back together: muted conversations from the hallway, the hum of the air conditioner. Fuck. He hasn't come that hard in weeks. He wants Wei Ying to tell him how good he is again.

"Oooooh," Wei Ying says, a little louder this time. "Oh, uh oh." A less than pleasant noise. Lan Zhan pries his eyes open - and sees immediately what the problem is.

"Fuck," Lan Zhan says, heartfelt and dismayed. They both look at Wei Ying's clothes, at the splatter of come soaking into the skirt he's still got bunched around his waist.

"I'll make the spec sheet for this one," Lan Zhan says. "And - hm."

Wei Ying laughs, a little hysterical. "Is it washable?" he asks.

"Hm," Lan Zhan says again, dubiously. They have a washer and dryer in their apartment, but Lan Zhan usually sends his out anyway; most of the things he owns are dry clean only.

"I'll pay for it," Wei Ying says, even though it's obviously not his fault, and besides -

"There's no retail value," Lan Zhan says. He's slurring a little bit, still recovering. "It's just a sample. Did it get on your shirt?"

"Shit," Wei Ying says. He moves automatically to hold the fabric out from his body. Only Lan Zhan's hand on his wrist stops him from smearing his shirt with the come that's all over his hand.

"I'll get you a tissue," Lan Zhan decides. He tucks himself back into his pants, wincing. He wobbles when he stands, as if he were drunk. He feels good all over. He could lay down on top of the drafting table and take a nap. He could sit down and sketch forever. He could take Wei Ying home with him and do all of it all over again.

"I think my shirt's okay," Wei Ying says thoughtfully.

"Hmm," Lan Zhan says. He brings the box of tissues back with him. Wei Ying takes it, wipes himself clean, and accepts a hand up.

“Thanks,” Wei Ying says. Together they peel him out of the soiled skirt. It feels - normal again. Lan Zhan has undressed Wei Ying dozens of times at this point. His heart is still pounding, he’s a little sweaty, but it feels - normal. He digs the plastic bag from Lung Moon out of the trash and drops the skirt in it, tucks bag and skirt into his backpack to see if it can really be laundered. When he turns back around Wei Ying is kicking the drop cloth back into place. He’s pulled his hair back and set his clothes in order. There are three marks on his neck, barely noticeable just yet.

He looks up when he feels Lan Zhan’s eyes on him, and smiles. “Ready for the shorts?”

-

They finish up about an hour later.

It’s all very anticlimactic. As with almost every other garment they’ve gone through, Lan Zhan holds the shorts in place so that Wei YIng can shimmy out of them without knocking loose any of the dozens of pins, or stabbing himself with them. He folds the shorts carefully and puts them on Miriam’s desk, to be dealt with on Monday. By the time he’s turned around, Wei Ying is doing up the fly on his jeans and pulling his hair loose from its bun. He shakes out his shoulders and cracks his neck. Two of the marks on his neck have faded already. One is deepening to a beautiful bruise, unmistakably teeth-shaped. Lan Zhan would like to put some more on him.

“Well,” Wei Ying says. He puts his hands on his hips and laughs. “All done! See you in a couple weeks, right?”

“Right,” Lan Zhan echoes. “I will - Miriam will email you when the samples are due to arrive, so you can arrange your schedule.”

“Great,” Wei Ying says. He says it again. “Great.”

And that’s it. They shake hands. There’s a moment where Lan Zhan thinks of asking for his number and doesn’t. A moment where Wei Ying lingers, his hand in Lan Zhan’s, and it seems like he wants to say something. But then he only laughs and lets Lan Zhan’s hand fall, and leaves.

Chapter 5

Chapter Text

On Saturday, Lan Zhan wakes early. He feels - quiet. He lays for a long time in his soft, clean sheets, thinking about nothing in particular. After Wei Ying had left, he'd finished up the work day in a bit of a daze. He smelled sex on his own face and hands. He left the office when he was done working, early enough that he crossed paths with his brother in the lobby of their apartment building, and allowed himself to be turned around and roped into Lan Huan's dinner date with Mingjue. It *was* a date, with reservations at the kind of place that looks like somewhere else, like a pawn shop until you give the girl your name and she opens a falsely hidden door, granting you access to sweeping chandeliers and velvet booths and pink champagne served in the bathroom. Mingjue accepted Lan Zhan's presence gladly, and didn't mind that he mostly sat quietly, pensively picking over his plate. He still had the come-stained skirt tucked inside his backpack. He sipped his champagne and imagined the ghost of sex still lingering on his hands.

In the morning, he lays in bed until he hears sounds of life coming from the rest of the apartment. He slips out of his room to find Mingjue shirtless in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. "Good morning!" Mingjue says, first in English and then, laughing at himself, repeats himself in Chinese. Mingjue grew up in California and mostly goes by Michael, and his Chinese a lot better than Miriam's, but he says it still feels like a second language in his mouth. He's trying, though. For Lan Zhan's sake, mostly - Lan Huan is comfortable in any language, in any place he finds himself.

"Good morning," Lan Zhan returns, and instead of retreating to the bathroom to see what's itching under his skin, he sits down on the other side of the counter to keep Mingjue company.

Lan Huan is leaving for China in the afternoon. He'll be gone for almost three weeks. Long enough to see through the full process of

costing and finalizing their Resort collection. To see in real time to any issues that come up in the second round of sampling - to make sure that JLT's sample room uses the correct materials, the approved construction methods, the right measurements. He'll see their uncle in Shanghai. He may even go to Yunshen, but maybe not: Suzhou is a few hours drive from JLT's factory in Hangzhou, and like Wen Qing said, Yunshen's production line is fully booked. They're making products for other people.

It used to be Lan Zhan's role to do these things, back when overseeing a sample room only meant walking down the hall from his cramped office, the one that overlooked the tree in the courtyard. In most companies it would still be his role, to fly back and forth and fight these battles in person. But Lan Huan goes in his stead, and it works well for both of them.

Eventually Lan Huan stumbles bleary-eyed out of his own room. He comes to sit next to Lan Zhan. He puts his head down on his folded arms and appears to go back to sleep, right there on the counter. None of them talk much - Mingjue just to ask where they keep this or that condiment, Lan Zhan just to answer him - and the quiet is nice, infused with the smell of steam from the rice cooker, the sizzle of eggs in the pan. He sinks into it until he catches the way that Mingjue is looking at Lan Huan's sleep-rumpled self: soft and unashamed, all of his heart visible in the twist of his smile and the glad crinkle of his eyes.

Lan Zhan pulls away. He retreats to the bathroom and removes one plant from his back, which has sticky fingers and is curled over one of his shoulders like a hand, just barely brushing his collarbone. By the time he finishes, breakfast is ready.

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He almost texts Wei Ying several times over the course of the weekend. He has Wei Ying's contact information of course - his CV lists email, phone, and an address in Queens. It is, however, a clear violation of ethics to use Wei Ying's resume to contact him for non-professional purposes. He almost does it anyway. He pulls up Grindr, scrolls through weeks of messages to find that WY?'s account has been deactivated. He wonders when that happened. Before he'd met Lan Zhan again? Or after? Before they had hooked up? Or after?

It feels like shaking sticks to see his future. He reads nothing into it, or too much. He goes through and rereads their messages anyway. He answers the emails that his brother sends from the plane. He doesn't answer the photo Lan Huan sends him over WeChat: breakfast at the Hangzhou Shangri-La, his laptop open, printed spec pages tucked between his plate and cup. Meng Yao's small, pale hand is at the edge of the frame. Did Lan Huan send the same photo to Mingjue? Or a different one, more carefully cropped?

He doesn't go out. He spends all of Sunday in the apartment, stretching out his edges. It feels strange not to have Lan Huan there - even though Lan Huan had spent almost as much time in Hangzhou as he did in New York, the first year or two that they were living here. Even though they haven't seen each other much, over the last few months. He spends the day cleaning. He takes everything out of the fridge and wipes down the shelves. He takes stock of all of the medicine in their cabinet, writes down the antiseptic creams and bandages that he's used up and needs to replace. He wipes down baseboards and the filter inside their central air conditioner. He leaves Lan Huan's door closed and his room untouched. He eats leftovers for dinner, sitting on the couch closest to the windows, wondering what Wei Ying might be doing at that same moment.

-

On Monday he sees a woman on the subway with vines in her hair.

He drops his mug of tea. Thankfully it's early and the car isn't very crowded, and it doesn't spill. He mutters apologies anyway as he slips between bodies, walking to fetch his mug. It's come to rest at her feet. His body stoops without him; he can't look at her; he can't *not* look at her. An older woman. Black. Dressed for the office. She leans down and hands him the travel mug from between her feet. He stands, clutching it with both hands. Completely unprepared if the train lurches. She looks up at him for a long moment, warily. There: he didn't imagine it. There's even a flower in one of them, tucked as neatly into a brown curl as if she'd put it there herself. Faintly, just visible below her ear, is moss. Just the faintest tinge of green against her skin, more texture than anything else. It disappears below her collar. There are little green dots just along her jawline, where more is threatening to grow. Nothing has ever grown on Lan Zhan's face, and he feels panic run cold through him at the thought of it, and then confusion: it's so visible. There are two other people sitting with her, strangers, one on either side of her. The one on her left is only a few inches from the vines, from the moss, but her eyes flick up from her phone and land on Lan Zhan instead, eyeing him as if *he's* the disruption, the thing that's strange here.

Can they -

Can other people not -

"Can I help you?" the woman says finally. Her tone is a delicate balance between politeness and hostility. It says, leave me alone.

"Mmm," Lan Zhan manages, incoherently. He grasps for English, and his brain spits out a single word. "Directions?"

Her face relaxes by degrees. Her hands are wrapped tightly around the handbag in her lap. They don't make any move to cover the moss on her face, or the vines in her hair - the way that Lan Zhan's hands twitch around his travel mug, wanting to cover up the bandages hidden on his neck. No - to show them to her.

The thought is horrifying. It spreads across his shoulders and makes his whole body itch. He wants to run, but there's nowhere to go - just the other side of the train car, and she's looking at him. She says, her voice much softer, "Where are you trying to go, honey?"

"The Empire State Building?" he asks. It's the only place he can think of. Her face softens further. He becomes a lost tourist in her eyes, instead of a strange, tall man looming over her. Harmless. The flower in her hair bobs, tugging Lan Zhan's attention. He trains his eyes on her face in a state of terror. The vines are different from the ones growing from his back. Darker and more delicate looking. The flower is different too. Hers is red, curled. Lan Zhan's are white and star shaped, like jasmine.

Can't anyone see it?

Are they not real?

"Get off at 33rd Street," she says. "When you leave the train station just take one of the exits marked west, okay? With a double-u. It's only a couple blocks away." Here she smiles. "Don't worry, you can't miss it. It's a real big building."

"Thank you," Lan Zhan says, automatic and desperate.

She calls out to him when he exits at the next station instead, which is 14th Street. He ignores it, his hand gripped tight around his travel mug and his other hand itching towards his own neck. Union Square is crushed with people, moving like ants in all directions, and he lets himself get swept into the flow. He comes above ground to find more people, a farmer's market, the smell of wet vegetables and fresh bread, lavender and apples grown upstate. It's immediately, crushingly overwhelming - no one is looking where they're going, they lurch directly across his path to peer blindly at stacks of fruit, as if he wasn't there at all.

He searches faces - hundreds of faces, streaming around him like water around a rock - but all he sees is skin and hair and bodies, and the same suppressed panic that he feels spiraling in himself: that animal need to be alone, to be separate, to hide.

-

He almost asks Miriam, but nothing grows on him for the whole work day. All that he'd have to show her are the holes left behind.

He almost asks his brother, when he calls that night - early in Hangzhou, the day just getting started, Yinzhu and Jinzhu behind him wreathed in cigarette smoke, Meng Yao sitting halfway down the conference table with his own cigarette, his ankles crossed and his head bent over a tablet. Lan Huan looks happy and well rested and Lan Zhan still has nothing to show, no living, green tangle of vines that he could shake in front of the little screen and demand, *tell me this is real, tell me you can see this.*

In the morning he feels less frantic, and crushingly glad that he couldn't say anything, that he didn't do anything crazy. What were the options? That his brother would look and say, "Yes, A-Zhan, that is a plant. Why are you so upset?" and then Lan Zhan would have to explain that he had grown it under his own skin, that every day he woke as a garden that only lived as long as it took him to ruthlessly take it apart.

Unthinkable. And even more unthinkable is the alternative, that Lan Huan would look and see only empty air and huge gaping wounds in his brother's back, which he had done to himself for no reason at all, or in the grip of a psychosis so deep he had lost the ability to tell what was real and what wasn't.

No. He has kept the vines to himself for this long. There's no reason to tell anyone about it now. He has too many responsibilities to stop everything that he's doing, how hard he's worked. Lan Huan had said it himself: they need to do well. ORCHiD needs to do well, they need to sell, they need to be the best. There's not another option.

Lan Zhan feels much more at peace, having thought all of this through. It's impossible for him to be - to be sick, or crazy, when he can think so clearly. When he understands so well how he has to prioritize.

Still, when he's gotten up, he stands completely naked for a long time in front of the bathroom mirror, staring down at what he'd pulled out of himself. The roots are long, and smear blood all over his hands. The vine itself is not actually that long - ten centimeters, maybe fifteen - not as long as on some other mornings - but it has three delicate leaves and the faintest trace of silvery bark starting to grow at the base. There's a little cluster in between the leaves that might become flowers, if given a chance. He touches the serrated edges of the leaves gently, with just the very tips of his fingers. Then he rinses the roots and his hands clean, and goes to find a glass of water to put it in, to see what will happen.

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On Wednesday, Mingjue comes by Lan Zhan's studio and invites him to go to Flushing over the weekend. To *hang out.*

"Why?" Lan Zhan asks. The question sounds suspicious. He clears his throat.

Mingjue shrugs. He doesn't look bothered. "I want hot pot," he says.

"There is hot pot in Manhattan," Lan Zhan points out.

Mingjue grins at him. He's a big man. Not really that much taller than Lan Zhan and his brother, but broad in a way that neither of them are. His shoulders fill a doorway; he dwarfs Miriam when they stand next to each other. Lan Zhan had liked him immediately - at first because he was happy to have another Chinese person join

their extended team, and then just because. Mingjue's team handles customs compliance, shipping, operations - an endless, horrible amount of paperwork and legal forms that Lan Zhan has maintained an almost perfect ignorance of throughout his career. There are many careers in the fashion that few people know is someone's job to do, and fewer still that would be able to describe the ins and outs. Wen Qing's Production team is one of them; Mingjue's Operations is another, and both of them are invisible until something goes horribly wrong.

The person who handled Customs and shipping at Yunshen had been one of the few people Lan Zhan has ever truly hated in his life. He'd been someone's friend or cousin, a local boy to Suzhou, who spent all his weekends on Nanjing Road in Shanghai, snapping up designer knockoffs with glaring, poorly done logos. Although math was the man's job he was *terrible* at it, and it cost Yunshen in delays, labor, and customer goodwill, in the simplest and stupidest ways: if you tell a customer, here are the size of the cartons, here is how many garments you can pack into each carton, here is how many cartons will fit into a 20' or a 40' container, or a 40' high cube, then the customer will take that information and use it to figure out the cost per unit of shipping products from one country to another, which then is added to the price they will name when they sell it to the retailer. Shipping is expensive even by boat, and containers must be loaded efficiently in order to spread that cost around to something bearable. A poorly loaded container may also damage the products inside: if there's five feet of dead space at the top, or it hasn't been loaded evenly end to end, cartons will crush and topple and fly around during the normal course of shipping, which will probably involve the container being dropped from a great height by a crane.

Su She still works at Yunshen, fucking up as many shipments as not. Thankfully, Lan Zhan no longer has to work with him. Instead, he gets to spend his days never thinking about HTS codes or customs clearance, and spoiling Mingjue's team with pastries in a spirit of spiteful gratitude.

"My brother told me about this place where they drop a whole stick of butter full of má là spices into the broth," Mingjue says.

“That sounds terrible,” Lan Zhan tells him, very seriously. From her desk, Miriam snorts. They’re speaking in English, because Lan Zhan is trying too.

“Is that the same place that’ll give you a big stuffed animal to sit with if you go by yourself, so that you don’t get lonely?” she asks. Mingjue bursts out laughing, but that sounds rather nice to Lan Zhan. Dining alone can be lonely.

“Why?” Lan Zhan asks.

“Why what?” Mingjue asks. He’s got one hip propped against Lan Zhan’s desk, which Lan Zhan actually doesn’t mind. His arms are crossed over his chest, and both arms and chest are covered by a plain gray button up shirt. Only the edge of one of his tattoos peeps out around his collar. He’s been dating Lan Zhan’s brother for nearly a full year, which is the longest relationship Lan Huan has ever had, strictly speaking. “Why the stuffed animal? Or why the butter?”

“Why,” Lan Zhan says, and then trails off, feeling strange. He doesn’t have a question in mind, exactly.

Mingjue shrugs. “Just for something different to do.”

And then he waits. Unhurried. As if it’s not a big deal, what he’s asking. It probably isn’t. This is probably a normal thing. Mingjue has been dating Lan Zhan’s brother for nearly a full year, probably for most people they would have some kind of relationship with each other as well by now too.

He has been lonely, with Lan Huan traveling. Mingjue has probably been lonely too, with how much time they spend around each other.

And maybe - unlikely, but maybe -

“Okay,” Lan Zhan says.

Mingjue smiles, as if he’d never doubted for a second what the answer would be. He reaches across Lan Zhan’s wide desk and claps a heavy hand down on his shoulder. “I’ll text you,” he says, “we’ll

figure out a meeting spot. If spicy, buttery hot pot doesn't sound good, we'll do something else. Xiao long bao crawl or something."

"Okay," Lan Zhan says, a little faintly.

Later in the week, as Mingjue faithfully follows up and they set a time to meet outside of New World Mall, he thinks of the last reason with a little guilt, a little impatience with his own foolishness. Wei Ying lives in Queens. Lan Zhan has never looked up the address on his CV, and has no idea whether it's in Flushing or somewhere else, and he knows perfectly well that there are literally millions of people who live in the borough. But maybe -

They might run into each other. Who knows.

They won't, but it's a nice thought.

Chapter 6

Chapter Text

Halfway to Flushing, Lan Zhan remembers why he hardly ever goes there. The air conditioning stops working almost as soon as they leave Manhattan. Someone forces open a window and stale air circulates sluggishly into the car, helped along by people fanning themselves with folded copies of AM New York, and sweetened by traffic fumes. He'd brought a sketchbook, but it's too crowded to work. He stands and plays a game on his phone one handed. He knows, intellectually, that Flushing is the last stop on the 7 train; that he will not miss his stop; that if all of the other Chinese people on the train abruptly exit then he can just follow them. His heart, however, has lost all sense of time. He has been on the train for two years, for five years, for longer than he has lived in New York City. He beats the high score on his game and resets with a sigh.

He still manages to beat Mingjue to their meeting place, if only by ten or fifteen minutes. Mingjue arrives in a flurry of white teeth and bare arms, pulling Lan Zhan in for a back slapping hug. He does this sometimes, even though Lan Zhan never quite reacts quickly enough to reciprocate. "Sorry I'm late!" he says. "I forgot to check if there was construction on my train line. It was only running every twenty minutes, I ended up just taking a bus to Hoyt-Schemerhorn."

"It's fine," Lan Zhan manages, and pats Mingjue on his broad chest until he lets go.

They do eat soup dumplings. Not at the mall, but at a restaurant close by, and then again at a different restaurant. "Did your brother recommend these too?" Lan Zhan asks.

Mingjue laughs, and admits that he did. "Are they good?"

They are. The dumplings are thin skinned, soft, delicious. In the first restaurant they're crammed into a corner table, close enough to brush elbows with their neighbors; in the second they share a big

table with a loud family, who argue ceaselessly about superhero movies as they spin the lazy susan around and around. When they were walking to the second restaurant he was bodily shoved out of the way by a grandmother in a hurry, who stood only about half his height. It's nice. This morning there had been only a single flower, and it had left hardly any hole at all. He hasn't been this relaxed in weeks.

Afterwards they go back to the mall, to walk off the soup dumplings and the turnip cakes and greens and scallion pancakes and pork belly, and to build up an appetite for Peking duck, at a place nearby that Mingjue swears his brother says has the best duck in Queens. Lan Zhan has never met Mingjue's brother, which only now occurs to him is maybe a little strange, after nearly a year. At the restaurants they mostly talked about work. A handful of Resort samples arrived earlier in the week, and a lot of people had trickled by Lan Zhan's studio to see them. The feedback, so far, has been nice, but it's always nice. Mingjue's week was consumed almost entirely by the journey of a single container's load from India, densely stuffed with branded tote bags, which he's pretty sure sat on the factory's dock for long enough that the bags will be moldy when they arrive.

"It rained for three weeks," he told Lan Zhan, "the port road washed out, we had to wait for it to dry up, and now the factory's coming after us to split the cost for keeping the container around for so long." He hissed as he burned his mouth on the hot soup. Lan Zhan poured him tea, passed him a napkin.

They wander through the dense maze of shops in a comfortable quiet, having run out of work topics. Mingjue is hunting for a new phone case. He looks for a long time through sparkly phone charms, glittery statues of dragons and Mickey Mouse. He even comes into one of the women's clothing shops with Lan Zhan, gamely tucking his elbows to fit into the narrow aisles as Lan Zhan stands in front of the mirror and holds blouses up against his chest.

"I didn't know you wore clothes like this," Mingjue says. In the mirror, Lan Zhan raises an eyebrow at him. "Regular clothes, I mean, not, you know," Mingjue says. He blushes a little, to Lan Zhan's amusement. "Clothes that cost more than my rent."

Oh. That's fair. "It's important to present a certain appearance at work," Lan Zhan says slowly, which is true, but he doesn't wear anything he doesn't like. He just likes these things too. The blouse in his hands is cheap - the girl in the corner, aggressively not paying them attention, will probably tell him it's thirty dollars or so. You don't haggle in Queens the way you haggle in Shanghai but there are still no prices marked, nothing but the shopkeeper to inform you of your own estimated value. It's cheap, and it's a soft, blushy sort of pink, with rhinestones dotted along the shoulder seam and all the way down to the wrist. He likes it. Enough to keep talking, a little shy about it, making the effort. "We used to shop at the street markets, back home. Our uncle would complain about the expensive clothes we bought, but I think he hated the cheap ones more."

"A little rebellious," Mingjue says. He relaxes a little, enough to pensively poke at an extensively decorated tank top, riddled through with laser cuts and tassels.

"No," Lan Zhan says. He doesn't think so, at least. "It's just something we've always done, ever since my brother and I were very small."

Next to him, Mingjue goes oddly still. Slowly, as if Lan Zhan was an easily spooked animal, he asks, "Did your mom take you?"

Lan Zhan blinks. In the mirror, his face looks slack and expressionless, like it usually does. Only his fingers, tightening abruptly on the cuff of the shirt in his hand, show anything of what he's feeling. "Yes," he manages. "She liked to look for inspiration, for her work."

"She was a designer, right?" Mingjue asks. He's drawn a little closer to Lan Zhan. His chin is tucked a little into his chest, like he's trying to make himself smaller, more harmless. The tank top is still in his hands, forgotten.

"Yes," Lan Zhan says. "Like me. She was very talented."

"I don't know much about your mother," Mingjue says. "Xiao-Huan never really talks about her."

Lan Zhan makes a soft sound in his throat. “No,” he says. “He wouldn’t.”

Mingjue looks at him intently, and then deliberately away. He moves back into the wider part of the store, a distance of only half a meter or so. “Do you remember much about her?” he asks, still not looking around. He reaches out a hand, tentatively dragging his fingertips through dense stacks of gauzy fabric.

Lan Zhan shakes his head, watching Mingjue through the mirror. “Not really.” He knows her face from photographs. Otherwise it’s all loose, disconnected sensations: the feeling of lace against his skin. The smell of rice being washed and then cooked. The powdery taste of cosmetics. He doesn’t remember what it felt like to be held by her, or what her voice sounded like, or her laughter. Maybe she hadn’t laughed much. He has no idea.

“You were pretty young when,” Mingjue says, and the awkwardness of the words, the way he lets them trail off into silence says, very clearly, that he *knows*. That Lan Huan has told him. Suddenly everything feels fragile, and absurdly fraught.

Well. It’s not that much of a surprise, is it. Just because Lan Zhan doesn’t tell people doesn’t mean that Lan Huan keeps to the same restrictions. It makes sense, actually. Lan Huan is used to speaking for both of them. He always has.

Abruptly, Mingjue’s shoulders drop, and he turns to face Lan Zhan. He looks at the back of Lan Zhan’s head instead of his eyes in the mirror. His face is open and shows all of his feelings, as it always does. “I’m sorry,” he says. “We don’t have to talk about it. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

Lan Zhan blinks at him. The phrasing he uses is formal, unnecessarily so. “I’m not uncomfortable,” he answers, even though he is. He looks over at the girl in the corner, still ignoring both of them, and puts the pink blouse back on its rack. He takes the tank top out of Mingjue’s hands and puts that back as well. They step back out into the mall together. The storefront was small, barely wide enough for Lan Zhan to lay down even if all of the clothes and fixtures were taken out of it, and outside of the glass walls the air is

immediately cooler on his face. He can smell, faintly, barbecue from the food court two levels down. Incense from a massage parlor, which he thinks is somewhere close by. He can't remember. It's been awhile since he's come to Flushing. Maybe a few years.

They walk over to the glass railing without discussing it. Mingjue rests his forearms on the gold bannister, and together they look down and watch the people bustling in and out of J-Mart on the ground floor, the shift of shadows spilling in from the outside as the rest of the world passes by. For a few minutes they only stand there. The silence is strange. Mingjue looks thoughtful. He rubs his fingertips over his mustache every once in a while. Should Lan Zhan speak? What should he say? Should he ask what, exactly, his brother told Mingjue about their parents? Should he ask what, exactly, Lan Huan remembers?

Mingjue speaks first, his tone heavy and deliberate. He doesn't look at Lan Zhan as he speaks, his eyes trained in the middle distance. "I like your brother a lot. He's - amazing. I've never met anyone like him. I, uh -"

He laughs. He rubs his hand over his mouth. Lan Zhan aches in sympathy and embarrassment. "It's fine," he says. "We don't have to talk about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable."

Mingjue laughs again, more heartily, a little surprised. "How many people know you're funny?" he asks.

"I'm not," Lan Zhan answers easily. He lets his face get a little softer though, looking down at Mingjue looking up at him, grinning.

"I'd like to be friends, A-Zhan," Mingjue says. "Would that be okay? You're so important to your brother, and I don't think I'd last very long with him if you and I didn't get along."

"We're friends," Lan Zhan says, still very soft. He feels fragile again and hates it. He thought they were friends already. And anyway, Lan Zhan is not a gatekeeper to his brother's affections. Plenty of Lan Huan's boyfriends have only thought Lan Zhan was strange, uncomfortably awkward. More than one of them asked if he was autistic (as if their uncle would have ever allowed Lan Zhan to be

evaluated for that). One thought Lan Zhan was crazy, asked if it was genetic. Come to think of it, that actually did end the relationship. Hm.

It's touching that Mingjue even thought about it, though. That he's making the effort. That he wants to be friends, even though Lan Zhan thought they already were.

"Good," Mingjue says. He sounds happy, and also very soft: softer than he might look to most people, who see *big* and *tattoos* and the stern face he wears to work. It's not as much of a mask as the boring, mass market button up shirts he wears in the office, and the way he tucks them into boring, mass market slacks, but it's close, and it makes Lan Zhan feel a wave of affection towards him, and also guilt.

He doesn't say anything, but he aches with it, and the silence takes on a slightly desperate quality. He casts around for something else to say: he looks around for something, anythi -

Oh.

Oh.

Down below them on the ground floor, standing opposite the J-Mart entrance, tucked unobtrusively besides a cluster of fake potted palms, surrounded by a pile of plastic shopping bags, is Wei Ying.

For a second Lan Zhan can't think or speak. His stomach feels hot. His palms are suddenly sweaty. Wei Ying's face is turned away from them and down towards his phone, but it's unmistakably him. He towers over the people flowing around him of course, but Lan Zhan has outlined the shape of his shoulders, the span of his back, the dimensions of his throat. He's thought a lot about Wei Ying in the past week - too much, he knows; so much that it's a little creepy, beyond the parameters of their working relationship and beyond a simple hookup, too.

"Oh hey," Mingjue says, following the line of Lan Zhan's gaze. "Isn't that your fit model?"

Lan Zhan makes a strangled sort of noise. It jerks Mingjue's attention immediately, and whatever he sees on Lan Zhan's face makes him burst out laughing. It's not an unkind laugh, and he pushes his shoulder into Lan Zhan's ribs. "Really?" he says. "You sly dog."

"Stop," Lan Zhan mutters. His fingertips grip his own elbows tightly.

"Are you gonna go talk to him?" Mingjue asks, still laughing. Lan Zhan looks at him, and Mingjue flaps a hand in dismissal. "It's fine. Go say hi to your boy. There's a sneaker shop in here I wanted to check out. Just text me if he's busy and you want to meet back up again."

Lan Zhan nods, steps away, hesitates. His eyes flicker down to Wei Ying, who doesn't seem like he's going anywhere, there's too many bags for one person to carry, but - "Do I look cute?" he asks, cringing at himself.

"You look cute," Mingjue confirms, and it's the same kind of tone that Lan Huan might use, more kind than Lan Zhan deserves.

He descends the escalator in a daze. His eyes feel stuck to Wei Ying's bowed head. He's thinking too hard about all of this. He's only going to go say hello to someone he knows. Whose dick he's had in his mouth. Who he likes. He can admit that to himself. It's fine. Wei Ying isn't looking up. He's absorbed completely by whatever he's looking at on his phone. He looks tired. He's dressed differently than he does for work. Just a plain black tee shirt with holes at the neck, faded from the wash. A pair of bright red basketball shorts, no logo, similarly worn. A pair of knock off Adidas slides, with black socks. His hair is loose around his jaw. He's beautiful. Fuck.

"Wei Ying."

Wei Ying looks up. For a moment everything is wonderful. Wei Ying's eyes light up and that smile starts to spread across his face, the slow, sweet, surprised one, which makes Lan Zhan's heart beat furiously in his chest - and then, visibly, Wei Ying panics. The light

goes out. The smile freezes, hanging onto his mouth by sheer reflex. “Lan Zhan!” he says. “What - what are you doing here? I thought you lived in Manhattan. I didn’t know you came all the way out here. What are um, what -”

It’s a lot of words all at once. Dismayed and confused, Lan Zhan says, “Soup dumplings.”

“What?” Wei Ying says. His fingers are gripping his phone very tightly.

“I came to Queens for soup dumplings,” Lan Zhan explains, inwardly cringing. “A friend invited me. My brother’s boyfriend. He said there was good Chinese food in Flushing.”

“Oh,” Wei Ying says weakly. “There is. Yeah. Really good. Um. Did you like them?”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan says. It’s so banal. Wei Ying clearly doesn’t want to talk to him. He shouldn’t have come downstairs. It all feels very weird and uncomfortable. He hesitates. “Well. I’ll -”

What he means to say is, *I’ll let you go. I’ll leave you alone. Sorry for bothering you. I guess I’ll see you in another week or two when the samples come in, and I am paying for your presence.*

What happens instead is something small and dense cannonballs into Lan Zhan’s legs and wraps around them. He staggers - his hands coming up automatically for balance - and looks down to see that what hit him is a child, quite small, who has wrapped his arms fully around Lan Zhan’s thigh, and is beaming up to him from ear to ear as if this is something very normal to do.

Oh no. Oh *no*. He’s so cute that Lan Zhan feels mildly panicked about it. He’s wearing a shirt with cartoon bunnies all over it. He has a little backpack that’s almost the same size as his whole body. He has the same bowl cut that Lan Zhan had when he was a child.

“A-Yuan!” Wei Ying says. Lan Zhan looks up at him reflexively, halfway stooped over this strange child. What? Not a strange child, then? “What are you doing? Let go of him right now.”

“Hi,” A-Yuan says to Lan Zhan, completely undeterred. His little fingers grip the fabric of Lan Zhan’s trousers tightly enough that Wei Ying has to crouch and pry him off, scolding the entire time. You’re too friendly, you can’t just run up to strangers and hug them, also I’m right here, you should run up and hug *me* instead if you want to hug someone so badly - the whole time whipping his head around, presumably looking for whoever was supposed to be minding A-Yuan before he abruptly launched himself across the mall.

If Lan Zhan had been confused before he is suffering now. What is going on. Who is the kid? Is this Wei Ying’s little cousin? His nephew? What is going on. Wei Ying swings A-Yuan easily into his arms, and A-Yuan settles comfortably into the hold, draping one chubby little hand over Wei Ying’s shoulder and idly playing with his hair. A-Yuan stares at Lan Zhan the whole time with the unnerving focus of the very young. “Hi,” Lan Zhan answers, finally. A-Yuan promptly pushes his whole face into Wei Ying’s neck, smacking his little skull into Wei Ying’s jaw with enough force that Wei Ying winces a little.

“Hi!” says a soft, bright voice from behind him. Wei Ying’s eyes shift automatically, and Lan Zhan turns to find a woman coming up towards them. The reason she’s lagging so far behind her - son? - is immediately apparent: there’s another infant strapped to her chest, its fat little legs sagging freely down from the harness, apparently deeply asleep. She carries a diaper bag in her other hand, and she’s a good head shorter than the two of them, delicate and fine boned and very pale. “Sorry,” she says to Wei Ying. “He took off running the second he saw you.”

She reaches out and touches A-Yuan’s hand, still wrapped around a hank of Wei Ying’s hair, at the same time that Wei Ying reaches out and touches the crown of the baby’s head. The exchange seems automatic, unthinking, just a little moment of touch and confirmation and ease, and abruptly Lan Zhan understands perfectly what’s going on, and he doesn’t like it, not at all.

Wei Ying’s eyes flicker to Lan Zhan’s. His mouth twists; he bites his lip. Caught, Lan Zhan thinks. Caught right out. He feels, more than anything, absolutely amazed. He hadn’t seen this coming at all. Wei

Ying had strolled into ORCHiD's office, looked Lan Zhan up and down and set something inside of him ringing. He'd thought it was recognition, a sense of sameness. Apparently he'd been wrong. Wei Ying, married with children. Married with children to a woman.

Maybe not married. The hand on A-Yuan's back is bare of any rings or signifiers. But the specifics don't really matter, not any more than it does with Lan Huan.

The woman turns her focus to Lan Zhan. There's nothing on her face but bland friendliness. She's sweating a little, where the baby's forehead is pressed against her chest. "Hi," she says, "I'm Yanli."

"I'm Yuan," A-Yuan - Wei Yuan, apparently - says, and pulls Wei Ying's hair.

"This is, umm. This is Lan Zhan," Wei Ying offers, before Lan Zhan can say anything. Her thin eyebrows twitch upward, and her eyes get a little sharper.

"The designer!" she says. She's very pretty. She's dressed simply, in an oversized tunic that shows her collarbones, tucked into a softly pleated pink skirt that falls to her calves. Nice, not showy, no obvious labels, but worlds away from the way that her - admit it - her partner is dressed. It's strange, that this detail is what pushes Lan Zhan into legitimate anger. "I'm sorry, I should have recognized you. Oh, it's so nice to meet you."

Lan Zhan looks at Wei Ying, who looks away, his face red. Wei Yuan's gone back to avidly watching Lan Zhan, his dark eyes big and bright and very unnerving. He's still the easiest person to look at in this tangle, so Lan Zhan looks at him when he says, "It's nice to meet you. Please excuse me."

Yanli makes a disappointed sort of sound, but Lan Zhan is already turning away. Everything he could think or feel is churning in his chest. How is he going to explain this to Mingjue? How should he act when Wei Ying comes back for fittings?

Damn, he'd really liked Wei Ying.

How humiliating. How boring.

And then Wei Ying catches his wrist.

It's an awkward hold. He'd shifted a little too far forward to grab Lan Zhan's wrist, and he has to reposition Wei Yuan on his hip to stop them both from falling over. He still doesn't let go. "Can we um," Wei Ying says, "can we talk? Please don't go."

Lan Zhan stares at him, waiting for the punchline.

Wei Ying turns and looks at Yanli. Amazingly, his lips push together into a pout. The nerve of this man! "Oh, alright," Yanli says, laughing. She touches his cheek and then pinches it, playfully. "You're forgiven. Help me get all of this into a cab, though."

"Do you mind waiting for a few minutes, Lan Zhan?" Wei Ying asks. He looks very nervous, which is understandable. Lan Zhan would also be nervous, if he ran into a hookup while he was with his family. If he was married. If he was cheating.

It's an effort to unfreeze himself just a little bit, just enough to say, "Fine."

Of course, standing still and waiting while Wei Ying and his partner juggle two small children and a larger mountain of groceries is inconceivable. How it actually works out is that Lan Zhan flags down a borough cab outside of the mall for Yanli, loads all of the groceries into the backseat for her, and helps her and the baby into the cab. "Will there be someone at home to help you with these?" he asks, unable to help himself. He looks back over his shoulder at Wei Ying, expecting to hand Wei Yuan over to his mother, but he's just standing there on the curb, watching.

"You're so sweet," Yanli says, which isn't really an answer. Outside of the uneven air conditioning of the mall, the baby is starting to make imminent waking up noises, stressed and unpleasant. His face is very red. Lan Zhan looks at him nervously, wondering if there's something else he can do to help. "Oh, these ones are Shawn's," she says, hands him back two J-Mart bags, and pulls the door closed. She winks at him through the window.

Not having anything better to do, Lan Zhan steps back onto the curb next to Wei Ying. He holds up the bag and Wei Ying says, “What? That’s not - *goddammit*.” He groans, heartfelt. For the first time Lan Zhan notices that Wei Ying is holding two other plastic bags, twined tightly against the wrist not supporting Wei Yuan’s weight. He’s also wearing Wei Yuan’s backpack for him. It’s extremely, horribly cute. Wei Ying moves to take the bag from Lan Zhan, who moves away, and then carefully extracts the other two bags from him.

“You wanted to talk,” he says.

Wei Ying bites his lip. It’s annoyingly appealing. “Have you eaten?” he asks.

Chapter 7

Chapter Text

New World's food court is packed. So is Golden Mall. Head over his phone, Lan Zhan says, "There's an ice cream shop nearby."

"Ice cream!" Wei Yuan cheers.

"Ice cream!" Wei Ying cheers, and then pinches Wei Yuan's nose. "You haven't even had lunch yet, and you want ice cream? What kind of fool do you think I am? What barn do you think you're getting raised in?"

In the end they go for hot pot. It is not, thankfully, the one where you can get soup made with spicy butter. Wei Ying gets spicy broth, and Lan Zhan orders Chinese herbal.

"Are you vegetarian?" Wei Ying asks.

"No," Lan Zhan says.

"You look vegetarian," Wei Ying says. The server nods in agreement. When they come to drop off the big pot of soup and the first few platters, they bring Lan Zhan a plastic poncho to cover his clothes, and a little bib for Wei Yuan. "None for me, I see my worth," Wei Ying says sadly. "A-Yuan, put on the bib. Look, gege's wearing his. All the cool kids are doing it."

He seems very casual for a man who has been caught cheating. Lan Zhan stares at the creamy surface of his herbal broth, just barely beginning to simmer, and feels a stupid sort of kinship. "Talk," he says.

Wei Ying's smile wilts. He drops winter melon and lotus root into each of their broths, absently. "That fast, huh? All business. No small talk. You're a lot more friendly at work, Lan Zhan. Which is kind of a low bar, honestly."

“Can I have an egg?” Wei Yuan asks. He holds out a reasonably clean palm. Lan Zhan plucks a quail egg from the pile of cabbage and tong hao to give to him.

“Talk,” Lan Zhan says again.

Wei Ying takes a deep breath. “I have,” he says, “given you some mixed signals.”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan says.

“Wow,” Wei Ying says. “Okay then. Are you gonna listen if I try to explain or are you just gonna die mad about it?”

“Wei Ying!” Lan Zhan thunders, and then feels immediately ashamed. He looks at Yuan, who is up on his knees and trying to peer into the soup. He says in a much lower voice, “He’s going to get burned.”

“A-Yuan, come on,” Wei Ying says. “You know how hot pot works, sit down. I’ll make your plate for you when it’s ready.”

Wei Yuan sighs loudly but obeys. His little fingers clench along the table’s edge, still attentive to the food he can’t have just yet. Lan Zhan gives him another quail egg. The broth is boiling now, and he adds meat and more vegetables to each side, moving automatically. And then says, low and furious, “I don’t help people cheat.”

“What?” Wei Ying says blankly. “You don’t - wait, what?”

Lan Zhan looks at him. Looks at Wei Yuan, nibbling on his egg. Looks back and sees understanding dawning in Wei Ying’s eyes - and then the man bursts out laughing. “Oh, whew,” he says. “It’s been a while since that’s happened. Look - you just met my sister. Yanli is my sister. Wow.”

Lan Zhan considers this carefully. “You don’t look alike.”

“Yeah, we’re not actually related,” Wei Ying says. “But she’s definitely married to someone else, and I uh. I only have one kid, as far as I know. But I’m single. I’ve been single for a while. Deeply, excruciatingly single.”

Lan Zhan has no idea what to say. He fishes out some meat and cabbage from the herbal broth and sets it on Wei Yuan's plate. “Thank you, gege!” Wei Yuan says, without being prompted. His smile looks just like his father’s.

“Where is his mother?” Lan Zhan asks.

“I don’t know,” Wei Ying says. It’s loud in the restaurant, and his answer is soft. They strain to hear each other. “Gone. Hopefully not dead. But no one’s heard from her in a couple years.”

The thought hurts unexpectedly. He’s grateful for the cover of eating, for the perpetual motion that hot pot allows. He isn’t even hungry, not really - not after everything he and Mingjue had eaten. “You’re raising him by yourself?” he asks.

Wei Ying smiles. He reaches out and ruffles Wei Yuan’s fringe. “We live with my ex’s sister,” he says. “We have friends. Yanli helps when she can, too.”

“Auntie Yanli is the best,” Wei Yuan says, and gives Lan Zhan some surprisingly intense eye contact. “She’s perfect. She deserves the best. Like a divorce.”

Wei Ying laughs like someone’s strangling him. “A-Yuan,” he says, “oh my god. What did we say about snitches?”

“They get stitches,” Wei Yuan says promptly.

“That’s right,” Wei Ying says, “they get stitches. Don’t make me have to carve you up for hot pot, okay?” He pinches Wei Yuan’s round chin gently, and then picks a piece of chicken off Wei Yuan’s plate and holds it out for him to eat.

Lan Zhan takes a deep breath, and then another. “I’m sorry. I misunderstood.”

“No, I,” Wei Ying says. His face twists. “It’s no big deal.”

Lan Zhan dips the ladle into the spicy side of the broth, and fishes out some lotus root to put on Wei Ying’s plate. “I’m listening,” he says.

Wei Ying's eyes flick up and meet his own. Lan Zhan watches him try to smile, and fail at it. He eats the lotus root and then some meat from his own plate. He eats quickly and steadily. He glances up every now and again, looking for Lan Zhan's reaction from the corners of his eyes. "So I," he says. "Like I said, I haven't dated for a while, and there's a reason for that."

"You're a single father," Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying blinks at him. "Yeah," he says slowly. Then again, more assured. "Yeah, it's. A lot, for most people. Which is totally okay! Not a lot of guys go on Grindr to sign up for a package deal. And maybe I'm um. A little protective. When his mom left, it was - it was a mess. I was a mess. Not really because of her, it was just -"

His lips purse around whatever he's thinking. "There was a lot that happened," he says finally. Lan Zhan nods. It makes sense to him. To suddenly have full custody of a baby would be overwhelming. Disruptive no matter what the circumstances were, leading up to it. His uncle had taken both him and his brother in after their parents' death, and it had overturned Lan Qiren's entire life.

"You seemed," Lan Zhan says, and then looks at Wei Yuan, eating a piece of cooked cabbage with both hands, "to like what happened. Between us. The last day at my office. Do you regret it?"

"No," Wei Ying says quickly, but he doesn't look at Lan Zhan. "It was great. Really fun. Everything about that was great. You're *really hot*, you know that? And just - yeah. Smart and talented and successful and rich. Perfect ten, total package kind of thing."

"But," Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying sighs. "But," he says. He sounds sad. It sounds like a full sentence.

Wei Yuan tugs on Wei Ying's sleeves. "Baba, I'm full," he says. "Can we get ice cream?"

"If you're full, how can you eat ice cream?" Wei Ying asks, sidelong.

"Oh," Wei Yuan says. "I'm not full."

Wei Ying laughs. He grins at Lan Zhan, including him in the moment, the circle of the little family they've made. "Kids are great," he says, as if he's imparting some sort of great secret on Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan knows that kids are great. He thinks kids are wonderful. It was maybe the only lesson that his mother was able to give him before she died: that curiosity and wonder and creation are good things, meant to be treasured.

"Hang on for a few more minutes though," Wei Ying says to Wei Yuan. "The grownups aren't done talking. You can play a game on my phone if you're bored, but you still have to chill here for a bit longer, buddy."

"Okay," Wei Yuan agrees, and accepts Wei Ying's phone.

"Sorry," Wei Ying says. He picks up his chopsticks and starts eating again, his eyes faraway.

"It's fine," Lan Zhan says. He watches Wei Ying and feels a pang of - sympathy? Yes. Disappointment, too. He knows what Wei Ying is trying to say. He helps him out. It's the kind thing to do. "But you don't want to date anyone."

Wei Ying looks up at him through the steam of their meal. The answer is written all over his face. "I'm sorry that I ghosted you on Grindr," he says. "And I'm sorry if I'm acting kind of, I don't know, confusing. I thought I was ready to just dip my toes in. Test the water out. Ended up panicking and deleting the app altogether, and then I walk into my new job and bam! There you are. Big as life and twice as gorgeous." He laughs and scrubs a hand through his hair. "I, um. I like you a lot. I think you're great. I'd have to be an idiot not to think you're great. But I don't have a lot of free time between work and school, and this little dude is my top priority. He deserves a stable home, after all I put him through. So, yeah. I, I'm not ready to be dating. Not in general, and especially not with someone like you."

Lan Zhan chews thoughtfully. The last bit is strange. Someone like him? Hm. But it doesn't really matter. If Wei Ying doesn't want to date Lan Zhan, he doesn't want to date him. Lan Zhan is very good with boundaries. Dating hadn't really even crossed his mind, strictly

speaking. He doesn't tend to date, not the way Lan Huan does. Most people aren't interesting enough to date. Most people aren't interested in *him*, beyond sex. It's just the way it is. He thinks for just a second of offering that: sex, without obligation or promise, the way he usually does. The way he's always been.

"Okay," he says instead.

"Okay?" Wei Ying asks. He reaches out for Wei Yuan and pulls him a little closer. Wei Yuan cuddles up to him without hesitation, without looking up from the game he's playing.

"Okay," Lan Zhan says again. "It's fine. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

Wei Ying flaps his free hand. "You didn't. It's all - hah. It's not you, it's me and all that. You know what I mean."

Not really. They've been speaking Chinese since he saw Wei Ying in the mall, but a lot of the things he says have the flavor of translated aphorisms. This one makes sense, even if he has a dim feeling of missing some kind of context. "It won't change anything about our working relationship," Lan Zhan says. "I'd still like to have you come back in a week when the samples come in. If you're comfortable with it."

Wei Ying's mouth twitches. It's not exactly a smile. There's something a little disbelieving about it, as if Lan Zhan is telling a joke. Or playing a trick.

"Your feedback has been excellent," Lan Zhan says. He's been told that his voice is monotone, but he tries to make it sound kind.

Wei Ying doesn't say anything to that. He just keeps looking at Lan Zhan. Thoughtful and considering.

Lan Zhan is the first to look away. "What are you studying?" he asks. "You mentioned school."

"Oh," Wei Ying says. He laughs, big and startled sounding. "Oh, um." He scratches his head. "It's computer science but like, focused on the algorithm side of it, and machine learning? Teaching

machines to think for themselves, sort of. It's kind of hard to explain."

The platters are nearly empty - just the smaller, broken pieces of shrimp, a scattering of tofu skin. Wei Ying's plate has some pieces of chicken lingering, bright red from his broth. His chopsticks are abandoned. Wei Ying is still watching him. It feels a little like the way he'd stared at Lan Zhan right before he'd made Lan Zhan come - that same sort of unnerving focus.

Before he can overthink it, Lan Zhan asks, "Do you want to explain it to me over ice cream?"

"Ice cream!" Wei Yuan cheers, and throws his little hands up into the air.

-

That night he has the nightmare again.

It happens every once in a while. Often enough that Lan Zhan should be used to it. He doesn't wake screaming anymore, like he did when he was a kid. It scared the hell out of their uncle whenever it happened, because otherwise Lan Zhan has never screamed in his entire life. He can probably count on one hand the number of times that he's even raised his voice. Not even sex makes him loud. Not even the best fucks of his life have made him scream. He barely knows how to argue and usually doesn't bother trying.

Objectively, it's not a scary dream. It's actually a very simple dream. So simple that his uncle and brother are the only people he's ever told about it, and will probably be the only people he ever tells, because of the way Uncle had reacted. Not with horror, but with impatience and dismissal. A-Zhan, are you a baby still? Grow

up and stop being afraid of the dark.

The dark was never the problem. It was waking in the dark and feeling the bed settle under the weight of a person who isn't there. And then -

And then, nothing happens. Nothing has ever happened. The nightmare is just the weight, and the feeling of being watched. That's it. No wonder their uncle had reacted with contempt.

He still almost breaks his bedside lamp trying to get it on, and the room is empty. It's always empty. His breathing is so fast and ragged that he's dizzy by the time he can get his feet under him. Once Lan Huan caught him staggering around the apartment, still mostly asleep, tearing at the curtains and opening all the cabinets to make sure that nothing was hiding in them. He doesn't do that this time, but he looks under his bed and in the closet and then since he's up he goes to the rooftop and sits curled in on himself until the sun starts to rise, pulling itself up by its fingertips onto the thinnest tip of Manhattan, and he has to go back to his apartment before the building's morning yoga class sees him.

The strange thing is, he doesn't find any plants on himself that day. Nothing has grown at all.

-

"A-Zhan, can you hear me? Is the connection okay?"

"It's fine," Lan Zhan answers. It's nighttime for him, and daytime in Hangzhou. The remains of his dinner have been tidied and put away. The city outside is nothing but blurry, indistinct lights, washed away by a driving spring rain. On his laptop is the smiling face of his brother, the smiling face of Meng Yao, and the unsmiling

faces of Yinzhu and Jinzhu. It looks like they're in Meng Yao's little office, probably because cigarettes are banned in the sample room, and Meng Yao smokes endlessly. The samples stacked up behind them will probably need to be aired out when they arrive.

They're the last samples to be sent, for ORCHiD's resort collection. They should arrive by Thursday. Lan Zhan has already emailed Wei Ying, to arrange the schedule. If the samples are good - if Yinzhu and Jinzhu took all of Lan Zhan's notes into account - then they should blow through the second round of fittings in three days or so.

"Fabric and trims have been ordered for salesman samples," Lan Huan says. Meng Yao laughs, strangely embarrassed sounding.

"Well, we went ahead and just ordered the bulk yardage," he says. He looks up at Lan Huan when he speaks. He's not really a small man, but everyone looks small compared to Lan Huan, and he's slim shouldered, delicate besides. When Lan Zhan met Meng Yao he'd been introduced as JLT's production planner, and Lan Zhan had thought he wore the kind of fashionable contacts that make your eyes look dewy and bigger than they are, like a cartoon character. It turned out that's just what he looks like, and also that for all intents and purposes he's the general manager of JLT's main apparel factory, just without the title. "I know it's a little in advance of production, but the fabric vendor wasn't sure about getting the right color match if there were two batches."

"I authorized it," Lan Huan says, to Lan Zhan.

"I've sent an invoice," Meng Yao says, "but JLT will credit the cost against the bulk order, once it comes through. This way also we can hold the ex-factory date of July 15th for you -"

"June 30th," Lan Zhan interrupts. "That's what we'd agreed on before."

Meng Yao and Lan Huan exchange a glance. Behind them, Yinzhu and Zinzhu are aggressively not paying attention, their bodies angled away from the screen and the conversation. Meng Yao's office is too small to hold more than himself, and it's usually piled

high with samples and sample books and endless stacks of paper records. Lan Zhan feels claustrophobic just seeing it, but also because of that look, the expression on his brother's face.

"Lao Zhan," Meng Yao says, "I've been told the order won't be placed for another two or three weeks. Please understand, July 15th is the best I can do right now. Would you be able to push Wen Qing to release the order any sooner?"

"I will," Lan Zhan says. He makes a note in his planner. "Costing is finalized now, correct? There shouldn't be any reason to hold off for another few weeks."

He doesn't see the way Lan Huan's expression freezes. He looks back up in time to see Meng Yao's dimples appear, like a defense mechanism. "I wouldn't know," he says.

They go through the last samples, holding each up in front of the grainy computer camera. Meng Yao holds his cigarette as far away from the clothes as he can get. They walk through the issues that Lan Zhan had seen during fitting. Yinzhu and Jinzhu complain about the amount of handwork. Solutions are worked out. Meng Yao takes all of the notes, promises to send them around later, with Wen Qing in cc.

"How about you, A-Zhan? How are you?" Lan Huan asks, as Yinzhu and Jinzhu depart in an angry cloud. Meng Yao steps away from the desk but doesn't go anywhere; Lan Zhan can see the snap and flourish of fabric in the background as he tidies and folds the samples. "You look tired."

He is tired. "I'm fine," Lan Zhan says. "Is your trip going well?"

Lan Huan's face lights up. He doesn't look at Meng Yao, but he shifts in his seat like a motion suppressed. "Good! I saw Uncle a few nights ago. He said the same thing you do, that we should place some orders to Yunshen."

"I have been asking," Lan Zhan says, irritated. "Do they have capacity for us?"

Lan Huan shrugs. “He didn’t say. I can ask him, if you’d like.”

“I’ll call him about it,” Lan Zhan mutters. He’s overdue for his weekly phone call by three weeks or so. He hesitates, indecisive, and then says, “I hung out with Mingjue over the weekend.”

Meng Yao is out of frame, and Lan Zhan can’t see his reaction. Lan Huan only grins. He’s always found it a little strange, how easily his brother smiles - as if there had only been a small pool of smiles to share within their family, and Lan Huan had taken all of them. “I know, he sent me the selfie you guys took!” he says. “What did you end up doing?”

“We went to Queens. Ate soup dumplings. Talked about work.” Lan Zhan chews his lip. There’s a lot of things he wants to talk about with his brother. He doesn’t want to talk about any of them in front of Meng Yao. It wouldn’t even help to switch to English, since Meng Yao is fluent in both, and Cantonese besides. But he doesn’t speak the Suzhou dialect that the brothers grew up with. Lan Zhan takes a deep breath and says, carefully, “Is ORCHiD in danger?”

Lan Huan’s head tilts to the side, and he doesn’t say anything for a long moment. Maybe he needs a second to process the change in dialect. “Why would you think that?” he asks, still in Mandarin. His eyes are clear, his expression untroubled. There are many reasons that Lan Zhan thinks that. A few things Mingjue had said over the weekend, each one innocuous by itself. The post-mortem they’d ran for the last Summer collection. The looks that Interwoven’s management gives him in the hallways.

He looks away, towards the windows and New York City spread underneath them, smeared with rain. “Is our company in danger?” he repeats.

Lan Huan’s face relaxes. “No,” he says. “We’re fine. It’s been a tough year for our budget, but it’s the same for all the other divisions too. Everything’s going to be fine. I have a lot of meetings booked for when I’m back in New York. We’ll get through this, okay?”

Lan Zhan examines his expression. Behind Lan Huan, Meng Yao is

standing very still, just at the edge of the frame. He takes a breath. It's so quiet in their apartment. Just the bare hum of the air conditioner, coming sluggishly through the walls.

"Okay," he says quietly.

Lan Huan looks at him for a moment without speaking. Finally, he says, "A-Zhan, don't worry so much. Okay? You've done amazing work. This collection is beautiful, and I think what you're working on for Spring will be even better. How could we be in trouble, with someone so talented?"

Lan Zhan's mouth twitches. "Stop," he mutters. "I'm going to bed, you can get to work."

Lan Huan laughs. "Bye, didi," he says. "Sleep well."

The video call ends, cutting out just as Meng Yao turns and says, "You shouldn't," and then nothing at all. Just a black screen reflecting his own face back to him, and also the plant that he'd left on the counter, carefully angled so it could be seen during the call. It's nearly doubled in size since Lan Zhan pulled it out of his body last week. The spindly little roots are thick and reach all the way to the bottom of the drinking glass it's still living in. He thinks maybe this week he'll get a pot and some dirt for it, and see how much bigger it will get. There are no flowers, but all along the thickening vine are tiny bumps, the potential of flowers or leaves - Lan Zhan isn't sure.

Lan Huan hadn't said anything about it during the call. But really, why would he?

Chapter 8

Chapter Text

The message says, *Are you into group stuff?*

A small party. An unknown number of men. *We're still putting out invites haha, we'll see who shows up.* Condoms and party favors provided of course. And in Manhattan, even - close enough to walk to, if you like to walk, which Lan Zhan does.

What time?

Late. Late enough that Lan Zhan almost reconsiders. But he's alone, and he's bored, and that in itself feels like reason to go. He doesn't have any reasons *not* to, after all.

He dresses carefully. A slim pair of trousers, light blue. No underwear. A white sleeveless shirt, almost transparent but not quite, with lace panels on the bottom, held together with a series of long ties. Everything is washable, a rarity in his wardrobe. When he checks himself in the mirror there are a few marks that show along his shoulder blades, but not enough to be suspicious. Without being able to see the rest of his back, they look like acne scars, or the multiplied ghosts of immunization shots. It should be fine. He applies makeup. Red and smudgy around his eyes. A glossy lip. The gloss won't last long but the eyeshadow is sweat-proof. He's tested it before in similar circumstances, and the effect is good. He has the photos to prove it.

The night air is thick and greasy. It's only barely May, and the days are still cool more often than not, but summer's potential hangs around like an unwelcome guest. Shanghai and New York have similar weather - similar enough, at least, in the way that the sun sears the heart out of you some days, and other days chokes you out with humidity and smog. At night, lower Manhattan empties out almost completely, and feels even more like a movie set than it does already. Steam vents dot every block, distorting the dimmed lights

of businesses closed for the day. It's how he'd imagined America, before he ever came here: his imagination shaped by movies their uncle forbade them to see. Or maybe there's something inherently ominous in walking by yourself in a city that should, by all rights, be full of people and somehow isn't.

A doorman building. Lan Zhan rarely gets questioned, but he offers the man an explanation regardless. "I'm going to 15C," he says, and the doorman says, "Go on up."

When the elevator doors open he can hear music drifting down the hallway. There's a smell in the air that reminds him of western style hotels in China, the kind that live as outposts around factory towns for overseas people to stay at when they visit suppliers. It must be the same kind of fragrance or cleaning products. The door to 15C is opened almost immediately by a man with a drink in his hand, laughing - not the man who had messaged Lan Zhan, but someone who had been in a few of his profile pictures. A boyfriend, maybe.

"Holy shit," the man says. "Uh, come on in. Wow. John, right? I'm Roberto."

There's more people than he was expecting, maybe ten or twelve - split between the little kitchen and the little living room and, presumably, the bedroom. "Not a bad turnout for a Thursday night," Roberto says, laughing. He puts a hand in the small of Lan Zhan's back and guides him further into the apartment, towards the kitchen. He pours Lan Zhan a drink without asking - something from the big blender sweating on the counter, frothy and pale orange, sitting next to a big bowl of condoms and a large bottle of lube. It smells like rum and tastes like pineapple juice. Lan Zhan doesn't usually drink during hookups. Alcohol makes him red and itchy and unfocused. But he supposes one can't hurt.

Thankfully, by the time he arrived people had already started taking their clothes off. One person in the living room is entirely naked; none of the others are fully dressed. Two people standing in the kitchen are lazily making out, their pants open and cocks out, masturbating each other. Lan Zhan sips his drink and watches them for a moment, conscious of Roberto standing close to him, of the men in the living room who all turned his way.

“So,” Roberto says, “are you a model?”

“Why are you talking?” Lan Zhan says, without looking at him.

The man who’d messaged Lan Zhan on Grindr stands up and joins them. He puts a hand in the back pocket of Roberto’s jeans. His name is also John, and he’s the only other Asian person there besides Lan Zhan. “We don’t have to talk,” he says.

“Hm,” Lan Zhan says, and reaches for him.

He goes easy as anything, slotting his body between Lan Zhan and Roberto, reaching up and twining one hand around each of their skulls. His fingertips bury themselves into Lan Zhan’s long hair, and pull, not quite hard enough. He tastes like rum and pineapple, and also like someone has come in his mouth already. Lan Zhan is aware, dimly, that the couple in the kitchen is now watching *them,* speaking in low voices, telling each other to look, god that’s hot, wish that was me.

Lan Zhan flicks them a dark look, and the bigger man bursts into soft giggles. He says, “oh my god,” into his partner's neck, groans, and then comes.

“What are you into?” John asks, and gratifyingly moans as Lan Zhan sinks his teeth into his throat.

“I keep my shirt on,” Lan Zhan says, lips against John’s neck. “I don’t bottom.”

“Fine with me,” John says breathlessly.

“Be rough,” Lan Zhan says, encouraged, and John immediately yanks at his hair, just the way he likes it.

Roberto’s hands roam across John’s body and find Lan Zhan’s, slipping under the lacy trim to find bare skin, scratching and pinching with his blunt nails. That’s fine with Lan Zhan too. It’s fine to touch. He’s aware that there’s starting to be less sensitivity on the skin on his back, as the scars and holes start to criss cross and fight for available space. But Roberto’s trying to pull Lan Zhan’s hips flush against his boyfriend’s, trying to grind them together - it

doesn't exactly matter if the skin under his hand feels numb.

He lets John and Roberto pull him into the living room, towards the group of men already sitting there. It's not a small room, probably about the same size as Lan Zhan's own living room, but the couch takes up nearly the entire room, and there's enough empty space for Lan Zhan to sit, for Roberto to sit next to him, and for John to wiggle his way into Lan Zhan's lap. The naked man is sitting on Lan Zhan's other side. He says, "Hi," and sticks his tongue into Lan Zhan's mouth.

No one tries to take his shirt off. Several people kiss him. There's enough kissing that he loses track a little bit, between when someone hands him his drink back and when someone else offers him a bump, which he accepts. There are so many hands on him, throughout all of it - they help him out of his pants, they touch his cock and his balls, they smear him with lube. The party is getting louder around him, and now he's only kissing John and Roberto and the naked man, who hasn't introduced himself yet, and is less individual now that most everyone else is naked too. On the other end of the couch, someone is giving a blowjob. It sounds like maybe someone is getting fucked in the kitchen. The little apartment is full of sex noises, the thud of Robyn on the speakers drowning it out for the neighbors. And Lan Zhan -

John had been wearing a plug when he'd sat down on Lan Zhan's lap. For a little while Lan Zhan fucked John with it, Roberto's hands between them on both their cocks, the naked man attending to his own. And it's good, but it's not enough, and he pulls the plug out and puts his fingers in instead, and that's good too, especially as Roberto slides two fingers into his boyfriend's body too, and they fuck him together. They're as rough with Lan Zhan as he'd asked for. Twice John slaps him hard across the face, and that's good too but it's still not *enough*.

He grabs John by the hips and bears them both to the ground, ignoring the man's surprised squeak, his "You're so strong!" The floor is covered in soft mats above the scuffed wood floor, and with John's legs wrapped around his waist the bowl of condoms is just out of his reach. "Will you," he asks, and Roberto puts a condom in his hand, and he and the naked man join them on the floor.

“Fuck me next,” the naked man whispers into Lan Zhans’s ear, and Lan Zhan kisses him so he doesn’t say anything else.

There’s a moment where he needs to focus - to tear open the little foil pack, stamped *NYC CONDOM* in rainbow letters, to lift the condom up and blow a short breath into it to start the quick process of unrolling it, to grab the lube and drizzle a little over his own cock before he covers it - and he looks up for the first time in a while, looks at the sweating, humping bodies around him, listens to the guttural sounds of men being fucked. For a moment he feels suspended, his thoughts empty, ready to be empty, to think of nothing but the ache in his balls and the slick inevitability of orgasm. And then he blinks and realizes that he’s bored. He will fuck John, and then he will probably fuck the naked man too, and at some point he’ll come, and then maybe someone will give him another bump and he’ll fuck more people, and eventually he’ll stagger home and shower and sleep and tomorrow he’ll go to work, and he’s so, so bored.

“You have a really nice dick,” John says, his whole body splayed and stretched around Lan Zhan’s, his own cock hard against his belly, his balls dark and drawn up tight, his hole glistening with lube, open and eager and ready.

“Thank you,” Lan Zhan says absently, and puts it in him.

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Lan Zhan wakes up in pain.

He was expecting to, on some level.

The hangover is there, as he knew it would be.

For a moment he doesn't move. Can't move. He blinks his eyes open and finds himself face down on his own bed, staring through the window at the city below. The morning is orange - the sun sitting malevolently in the sky, fully risen, baking the streets below it. There's a haze to the air that feels gritty, ugly even through the glass, the taste of it already on his tongue, pollution swimming in his veins. Then a muscle in his back twitches, and he cries out.

He cranes his neck, too afraid to do anything else. For a moment it's hard to make out what he's seeing, through the fog of his hangover and the impossibility of trying to look at your own spine. The pieces of it come into focus individually, like a movie camera - rolling over each individual piece as if that will make sense of the whole.

His back is covered in flowers. Dozens of them at least. Not all are in bloom: some are shy clusters of green, swaying in between their taller brothers. The air smells sweet. Not quite sweet like a flower, but sweet like the first few days of rot, and he retches dryly into his pillow before he can get a hold of himself.

Because he has to. He's alone. The only person he trusts in the world is on the other side of it, but even if Lan Huan had only been on the other side of the apartment, the thought of crying for help makes Lan Zhan's throat seal up. He has to get his shit together. He has to deal with this. He's the only one who can.

But it hurts.

It hurts!

He makes fists in his sheets. Even that small movement makes the muscles in his back shift, and he cries out again. It feels as if he's being flayed alive - as if each nerve ending has been wrapped in hundreds of hair-thin roots. He's sweating. It stinks of fear, and that strange sweetness, and the rum from last night.

He flings a hand over his shoulder, his teeth clenched tightly around a scream. He almost breaks the first flower that his fumbling fingers encounter. It feels immensely delicate. The roots are shallower than he's expecting, but as soon as it comes loose he feels hot blood bubble up out of the hole it leaves behind, streaking

down his skin. He drops the flower to the side and touches the edges of it tentatively. His hand comes back smeared with as much blood as he was expecting.

Fuck.

Fuck.

This has never happened before. It's never been like this before.

His chest heaves for air.

He has two options.

Stay and deal with this in bed, and probably ruin the bed. There's blood on the sheets already, little splatters here and there. If this much blood came from one flower, it will look like someone was murdered by the time he gets them all out.

Or. He could get to the bathroom and do this in the tub. Wash all the evidence away afterwards. That would be better. Cleaner. He doesn't want to make a bigger mess than he already has.

He crawls. Every single step is agony. He rubs the top layer of skin away on his knees. His palms are gritty and gray by the time he crawls across the tiled floor. When he looks back there's a trail of blood behind him. Just more droplets, trailing all the way through the hall from his bedroom. The color feels too vivid, too fresh against the pale wood floors and the white backdrop of the bathroom, which is gleaming subway tiles from floor to ceiling. He doesn't even have any gentle soap. Just body washes, skin creams, bubbling masks. He pushes himself up onto his knees, grabs the Aesop hand soap from the vanity. Stays there, panting open mouthed and humid for a long moment until he can bring himself to crawl into the tub.

He washes his hands first. Turns the tap on and kneels as close as he can get to it. The water is cold. Should it be warm? Does it matter? He washes his hands. They should be clean if he's going to be opening up wounds all over himself. His knees sting. His back hurts. Everything hurts. He's breathing too hard, too fast. He has to get it

under control. He's getting dizzy. There are three flowers bobbing in the cold water around his knees. Five now. Ten. They twirl like dancers, caught in the current between the tap and the drain. The water threads red and then clear, and then more red. He's lost count of the flowers. He doesn't really feel much of anything anymore. The numbness is a relief. Is this shock? Is he going into shock? He doesn't know. Doesn't know what that means besides something they say on television. His fingers find more flowers, more blood. Everything is slippery now. The water is higher now, coming up over his knees, the drain clogged with flowers. What if there are more sprouting? He never feels them growing, not exactly. He wakes up and they're just there. He gets itchy and they're just there. What if there are new flowers growing right now, taking the place of the ones he's uprooting?

But eventually - he thinks. He hopes - he runs out of plants. His fingers encounter nothing but blood and open, pitted wounds. For long moments he keeps searching anyway, certain that he's missed one, contorting his arms painfully to try and reach every millimeter of skin. He finds nothing. There's nothing else. Just blood, leaking hot and steady down his skin.

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He calls out of work. He goes to Urgent Care. There's a clinic down the block from his apartment, that he's been to once before. Their first year in New York, Lan Zhan had thought he was sick for three solid months. It turned out he was allergic to New York's variety of pollution, which had felt insulting at the time, until the constant coughing and sneezing turned into bronchitis. They have him sign in on a podium. His records are all saved there. The podium takes a photo of him. In the photo, his wet hair trails over his shoulders in horrible, clumped tangles. His face is bloodless, his mouth red.

There are bruises on his neck and chest. He looks already dead.

He'd dressed himself in one of the only dark shirts he owns. Navy blue linen, long sleeves, pearl buttons. It'll have to be thrown out after this, but at least it hides the blood. He's soaked most of the way through anyway, and the nurse has to help him peel the wet fabric up and over his head.

"What the hell," the nurse says.

"It is a sex thing," Lan Zhan says dully.

"A *consensual* sex thing?" the nurse asks, disbelieving.

"Yes," Lan Zhan answers, not looking at her.

The nurse is quiet for a long moment. She grabs a squeeze bottle of what he assumes is antiseptic and a stack of paper towels, which she sets next to him on the exam table. The liquid burns when she sprays him with it, and burns more when she starts wiping it away. "You know," she says, "if you're in danger at home, we have resources available. I can schedule you for a follow up appointment and have one of our counselors here in the room waiting for you, when you get here. No one else would have to know."

Lan Zhan swallows. His throat feels thick. His eyes burn, which surprises him. He doesn't cry. He hadn't cried while he was pulling the flowers out. He can't remember ever crying. He thinks maybe his body doesn't know how. And yet: his eyes burn and blur, even if nothing actually falls. "Really?" he asks. "You help people like that?"

Her hands pause and then continue, more gently. "Yeah, honey," she says. "There's help."

He clears his throat. Takes a long breath. "Thank you. I am okay. It was consensual."

She hums doubtfully. The stack of paper towels next to him grows small, runs out, and she has to get more. His back feels someone has doused him in gasoline and lit a match. It doesn't occur to him to ask for painkillers, lost somewhere in a fog of agony and

humiliation and surprise.

“Well, if that’s true,” she says finally, “they should have stayed and cleaned you up afterwards. But it’s okay if that’s not true. You can come back any time, you know.”

Carefully, lightly, she rubs a gloved thumb over the ball of his shoulder, and he has to close his eyes.

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When he gets home he cleans blood off the floor. Carefully, braced against the wall, swishing a wet paper towel across the bloodstains with one foot. A second time with a clorox wipe. He sits on the toilet and picks wet flowers out of the tub drain. He puts on a new shirt before he goes to dump everything down in the hallway garbage chute. They had prescribed painkillers before he left, to be picked up at the Duane Reade down the block, and no one had taken a second look at him in his bloody shirt, waiting to pick up his prescription, stinking of antiseptic. The painkillers make him feel fuzzy and lonely.

When he lets himself back into the apartment the first thing he sees is the plant, the one he’d gotten dirt and a little pot for, waiting on the counter like some sort of malevolent spider. Holding it at arm’s length, he goes and dumps it down the garbage chute as well.

He changes the sheets. He takes off his clothes. He folds himself naked back into bed. He checks his email. It’s only around noon, but Miriam has sent him a summary of the day so far - what she’s taken care of, what needs his sign off, what samples have come in. She’s sent a photo of herself wearing one of the new samples, smiling cheekily into the mirror in their studio. The shoulders of the jacket are so much wider than her own that the epaulettes sag. Wei

Ying will look cute in it, Lan Zhan thinks.

He wonders if maybe it *is* a sex thing. It had been the only excuse he could think of, to wander bloodstained into a clinic and not have them call the police, but - maybe. He's never noticed a pattern to when the plants sprout before. It seems to just *happen*. But he has a lot of sex, and he doesn't really track that either.

He sleeps. He wakes up sore but it's not terrible, not worse than overdoing it at the gym. It's late afternoon and even the hangover is gone. There's an email from Meng Yao, timestamped for around midnight local time - just a note to say that he hopes Lan Zhan feels better soon. Nothing from Lan Huan.

He orders delivery. He stays upright long enough to eat it at the counter. There's a little half ring of dirt where the plant had been sitting. He draws a fingernail through it, scattering the dirt like ashes. Even after he tidies up, a faint stain remains.

Chapter 9

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

The morning that final fittings begin, Wei Ying arrives early. The studio door is still open, the rabbit warren of cubicles still quiet. When a soft knock comes at the door, Lan Zhan looks up expecting to see one of the design assistants from another division, someone sent to nervously ask to borrow a trim book or get his advice on a garment construction problem they're having. Instead, there is Wei Ying, in a black pullover that says BLESSED on the front, tucked and belted into ludicrously wide-legged trousers. He has a tray of coffee in one hand and a smile on his face.

"Hey, uh," he says. He clears his throat. "Good morning! I hope it's alright that I'm here. I might need to leave a little bit early so I figured I might as well come in? I thought you'd probably be here already, I mean, it's almost nine o'clock so where else would you be, you seem like the diligent type. If you're not ready for me though that's totally okay, I can go chill in a cafe or something for another hour, do my homework ..."

He's still standing in the doorway, just beyond the threshold. He lifts one terrible, grubby sneaker and uses the toe of it to scratch his other ankle. Oh, this is awful. Lan Zhan likes him so much. He tilts his head and says, "It's fine. Come in."

Wei Ying comes in. He holds the tray of coffee out in front of him. "I brought coffee," he says, as if Lan Zhan hadn't noticed.

"I bought pastries," Lan Zhan says. Paris Baguette is not Lung Moon, but they make a nice croissant. If Lan Zhan had bought six of them as well as a dozen macarons, that's his own business. He'd

also bought a small coffee for himself, but he'd drank that almost two hours ago. He accepts an iced coffee from Wei Ying and hands over the blue paper bag in return.

They look at each other for a moment.

"Is this a little weird?" Wei Ying asks, laughing. "It's a little weird."

"A little," Lan Zhan admits. He thinks of what Wei Ying had asked, before he'd let Lan Zhan suck his cock. *Will you still respect me in the morning?* Well. "Would you like to see the clothes?" he asks, trying to spare them both.

"Yes," Wei Ying says, very firmly.

He takes a croissant, and keeps his pastry flaked fingertips conscientiously to himself as Lan Zhan pulls the garment rack to the center of the room. The samples are individually polybagged, and he takes each one off the rack, pulls up its plastic skirt, and holds it up for Wei Ying to see. The muslin placeholders are replaced with silk, linen, bamboo. His embroidery designs have been scanned, fed into a CAD program, and faithfully reproduced directly from the digital file. The lining panels are a perfect color match. Everything looks good.

He watches Wei Ying's face as they go through the collection. It's not so unexpected, how shy Lan Zhan feels about it. He wants Wei Ying to like his work. Interwoven's upper management has been in and out of the studio for the last week, stopping by to "see what you've got cooking," and the feedback has been good, but the feedback is always good. He's had four years to learn that the people in New York don't always mean what they say, not any more than they do in Shanghai.

"These are beautiful," Wei Ying says finally. He sounds thoughtful. He wipes his fingers on a napkin but when he reaches out he only touches where the polybags cover. "But I think I like your Spring collection better."

Lan Zhan lets out a breath.

Belatedly, Wei Ying claps a hand over his mouth. It's a very theatrical gesture, and a little at odds with the calm way he peers over his hand at Lan Zhan. "Is that rude? I'm sorry."

"I like the Spring collection better too," Lan Zhan says. Wei Ying's eyes crease at the corners. Interesting. Are they testing each other here? What is Wei Ying learning from him? "But these are still saleable. Don't you think?"

Wei Ying nods. "Definitely," he says, and drops his hand. "They're gorgeous. Lots of international appeal." He grins, and affects a nasally tone. "I'd wear this maxi dress to Majorca *and* Saint Tropez."

"Hm," Lan Zhan says, and pulls the polybag cover over it. "What about Shanghai?"

"Too cold," Wei Ying says promptly. "I've already left for my summer home weeks ago."

"Of course," Lan Zhan says. "My mistake."

"Macau though," Wei Ying says thoughtfully, "Wouldn't I look pretty in uhh - hmm, in this little beaded number, stepping off the ferry? Like a shot in a Wong Kar Wai movie. All I need is a handsome gentleman who'll let me gamble away all his money."

Lan Zhan lifts his eyes. Wei Ying meets his gaze, blinks rapidly, and then looks away again - down at the garment rack, the sum of all their work together. Wei Ying rubs a hand roughly over his cheek, as if he could scrub away the blush that's rising there. "Ah," he says. "Maybe we should get started, then."

It's tempting to be angry. Irritated, at least. "We need to reconfirm your measurements before we start," Lan Zhan says. "Do you want to wait for Miriam to get here, so that she can do it?"

Wei Ying stares at Lan Zhan's hands. He clears his throat. "No, it's," he says, "it's fine, you can do it."

"We can wait for Miriam," Lan Zhan says. "You can sit at the drafting table until she gets here, I won't bother you. It's no

trouble."

Wei Ying blinks, hard and rapid. "I know," he says. There's a tone there that Lan Zhan can't quite identify. "It's fine, Lan Zhan. I'm fine."

Lan Zhan picks up the measuring tape from his desk. The tape is thin and old, the numbers almost worn away by decades of use. He doesn't twist it in his hands, because he's been afraid for years that it might eventually break. He just holds it. He says, as gently as he can, "You are giving me mixed signals."

Wei Ying laughs. His hands come up and wrap around his own ribs. "Yeah," he says. He clears his throat again. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

Lan Zhan waits. He watches Wei Ying's expression firm, his spine straighten. "I'm good," Wei Ying says. "I'll quit making it weird. Come on, let's see if the cupcakes I baked with my kid over the weekend have fucked up my livelihood."

Lan Zhan hides a smile in the curtain of his hair, loose around his shoulders this morning. It's hot today. The first week of May, and the temperature rose sharply over the weekend as if in warning. Wei Ying strips off his pullover and wiggles out of his stupid trousers to stand bared before Lan Zhan - if bare includes a tank top and his boxer briefs, which are flower patterned.

He wraps the tape around the base of Wei Ying's neck. He says, "Will you," and Wei Ying slides a finger between his throat and the tape before he can finish the sentence. "Can you," Lan Zhan says, and Wei Ying bends an elbow and puts his hand on his hip. He holds perfectly still as Lan Zhan presses the metal tip into the middle of his back.

Wei Ying can't help himself for long, of course. Lan Zhan has just wrapped the tape beneath his armpits, around the widest part of his narrow chest, when Wei Ying breaks. "So how *is* your Spring collection coming along?" he asks. His voice is high. A little breathy. "You're probably working on it already, right?"

"I am," Lan Zhan allows. He moves a half step away, to scratch

down the measurement in his notebook. Beneath his other hand, he can feel Wei Ying's chest rise and fall. Wei Ying's tank top is soft against his fingers. It's an ombre tie dye, pink cascading into blue.

"I hope I get to see some of it," Wei Ying says. "I really loved your sketches. Do you make technical drawings first or just go straight into making prototypes yourself?"

"I create the prototypes," Lan Zhan answers. "And of course you'll see them. I am hoping you will model them as well." He lets the tape measure sag, drawing the circle of it down Wei Ying's chest to his natural waistline, close to where his belly button would be. His waist is so slim. Lan Zhan's hands could probably span almost the entire circumference of it. He has more body hair than Lan Zhan does, which Lan Zhan finds deeply appealing. Just under his fingertips is where Wei Ying's hair starts on his stomach. It had felt so good under his hands, during those brief minutes he was allowed to touch.

"Please," Lan Zhan says, and Wei Ying slips two fingers underneath the tape. His knuckles brush against Lan Zhan's and both of them twitch. Lan Zhan's fingers tighten on the tape. They don't look at each other. He wants to drop the tape on the ground, flatten his palm against Wei Ying's stomach. He wants to hold Wei Ying down and grab his cock through his clothes, the way he had before. He wants Wei Ying to touch him. He wants Wei Ying to push him down onto his knees and pull his hair. It would be so easy. He can tell that Wei Ying wants all of that too. He's blushing again. The room feels humid on Lan Zhan's skin, the air thick in his lungs. His breathing is deep and controlled. Wei Ying's stomach muscles jump against the backs of Lan Zhan's hands.

Is Wei Ying hard?

He's afraid to look.

He's aware, dimly, that they're both frozen in place. He's afraid to look anywhere - down, to see if Wei Ying is turned on. Up to Wei Ying's face, to see if he wants Lan Zhan to do something about it. Under his hands Wei Ying is similarly tense. From his peripheral vision he can see that Wei Ying's eyes are very wide, and he doesn't

seem to be blinking. They're just standing there and breathing at each other, foolishly.

Wei Ying's lips make the shape of Lan Zhan's name.

The studio door opens, and Miriam walks in.

She has her sunglasses on and her headphones still in, and she stops dead when she sees them.

Then she throws both hands up in the air and cheers, a little too loudly - unable to gauge her volume through the thump of the bassline in her ears. "Shawn's back!" she crows. "Hi Shawn!"

Wei Ying bursts out laughing. It's a horrible, high sort of giggle. His hands come up and grip Lan Zhan's wrist, his elbow. He sways forward like he wants to drop his forehead against Lan Zhan's shoulder. Thankfully, Miriam doesn't seem to notice - she's gone behind her desk and is getting settled for the day, dancing along to her music. Hidden between their bodies, Lan Zhan shifts his hand in Wei Ying's grip - just far enough that he can rub one thumb over the back of Wei Ying's hand. Then he steps away, and they look at each other.

"I have to do your inseam next," Lan Zhan informs him.

Wei Ying only giggles more - but he's grinning. This time he meets Lan Zhan's eyes without flinching.

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It's easier, after that. Awkward, but the awkwardness is out in the open - or rather, the awkwardness binds them together in a conspiracy of two, against Miriam's innocuous and cheerful

presence. Wei Ying laughs his way through Lan Zhan taking his inseam measurement, his hands clasped over his face. He laughs his way through the first three garments. He laughs for so long that Lan Zhan ends up laughing too, just a little. The boundaries that he had set in his own mind turn soft, adjusting around the edges of Wei Ying's smile. He feels included. A little confused. It's not a bad feeling. Transitionary, maybe. The sense of something growing.

Lan Zhan buys Wei Ying and Miriam lunch from Woorijip, one of the take-out spots on 32nd Street, and they sit together over the drafting table to lay out the next few weeks. Manufacturing is a cycle, but one that overlaps, intersects. ORCHiD's Fall collection left China two days after they'd interviewed Wei Ying back in March. Resort has been in development since December, and will be officially handed over to Wen Qing's Production team as soon as Lan Zhan can personally manage it. The Spring collection is already dominating his attention, leaving the finishing details of Resort to Miriam. In another week he'll start working on the initial concepts for Summer.

The twenty looks that were adopted officially into the Resort collection are sitting cheek to cheek on the garment rack with twenty others, alternatives to flesh out the retail collection. Everything must be photographed. Everything must be sold. "We'll be making any fit adjustments on the samples that are already here," she tells Wei Ying, "so pretty much as soon you guys are through with that, we can start photography."

Wei Ying chews pensively on a spicy kimbap. He's got his phone out on the table, taking notes. "It's just a lookbook, right? Or is it editorial?"

"Just a lookbook," Miriam confirms. "Bring your best apathetic expression. We really only do editorial when a retailer pays for it."

"Gotcha," Wei Ying says. "I do still need the same hours, if that's okay."

"Yeah, that's fine," Miriam says. She has a soft tofu stew, left mostly by her elbow as she focuses on a paper calendar. "I'll book the photographer this week. Does um," and she draws a green marker

through a handful of days.

“Yep,” Wei Ying says, “those days are fine. Lan Zhan, when do you want me? Uhm. I mean, when do - what’s your schedule for Spring? If you still want me for that.”

“Stop,” Lan Zhan mutters. He has cold noodles himself, and he regrets it a little. Miriam hands him a blue marker. He taps it on the table twice and then circles the fourth week of May, open ended. “It may be more than two weeks,” he tells Wei Ying. “The construction will be more complicated with this collection.”

Wei Ying leans forward to look. His shoulder brushes against Lan Zhan’s, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “Can I have a pen?” he asks. Miriam gives him a red one. “I have finals here,” he says, and draws x’s across two days. Lan Zhan adds two more days to June and then, with a black marker, scatters a few small money symbols through the rest of May and the first half of June. Sales meetings, line reviews, marketing meetings. Mostly for Resort. Some, still, for Fall. Dealing with the additional inventory that Interwoven’s management has saddled them with, when the initial order hadn’t even sold through yet. Time to hustle, Steven!

Lan Zhan’s fingers tighten on the marker. He sets it down carefully.

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They finish up as the afternoon sunlight is slanting across the floors. Lan Zhan has hours of work to do after Wei Ying leaves. It’s work he’s looking forward to - he’s scheduled to start draping one of the more interesting ideas from his Spring sketches, and his mind is already turning over how he might accomplish this detail or that. This is always his favorite part of the cycle, even more than showing at Fashion Week, but as he sorts through the big bin where

he stores rolls of muslin and dyed sample yardage, he finds that he's genuinely, honestly excited - for the first time in a long time. He knows that the concepts for Spring are solid, but his work is always solid, and Spring is exciting. He wants to see it come to life.

"Hey, um," Wei Ying says. Lan Zhan looks up. Wei Ying is fully dressed again, his backpack slung over one shoulder. He's blushing a little, and he's scratching his neck with one hand. The other is behind his back. "I have something for you."

He shifts. There's a notebook in his hand. He draws a single sheet of paper out of it and gives it to Lan Zhan. It's covered in crayon: big looping swirls of color that might be shapes, or Chinese characters, or nothing at all. Lan Zhan stares at it silently for a long moment. "Did A-Yuan do this?" he asks.

"No, I made it," Wei Ying says. "They've got this new exhibit on abstract minimalism at MoMa PS 1 and I was just so inspired. Just kidding, of course he did. He made it for you! And then demanded that I give it to you, like the little dictator he is. I think that sort of blue blobbiness on the side there is you. The little brown scribble is him. He's really consistent with the self-portraits, to be honest. Puts himself in everything. I'm in there too, see? He made me shorter than you. Kids are so cruel."

His grin flickers at the corners. "Thank you," Lan Zhan says, because he knows he should say something. He traces the colors with his eyes. Yes, he can see himself. He can see Wei Yuan, Wei Ying. Maybe the bigger circles are their apartment, or a building, or the limitless stretch of the sky. He turns away and grabs a T-pin from the board next to his desk, reconsiders, and takes one of the cubicle clips instead, nestling Wei Yuan's drawing carefully next to one of his own.

"Please tell A-Yuan thank you," he says to Wei Ying, when this is accomplished.

Wei Ying nods. He's not smiling, not exactly, but his eyes hold the shape of it. He takes a deep breath, but all he says is, "Yeah, I will."

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Lan Zhan works through the weekend. He leaves his studio door open. He sets his Spotify radio to Teresa Teng and lets it run for hours. He sings along to some of the songs, softly even though no one is there to hear. He's pricked himself with so many pins over the years that he's built up thick calluses on the tips of his fingers. His forearms are lined with faint red streaks, the faded ghosts of steam burns and the corner vee of industrial irons. The sewing machine sings with him.

The next morning there are five vines. One of them is in his armpit. It doesn't hurt more than the other ones - the plant itself was barely longer than his armpit hair - but the roots are long enough that he can feel them under his skin, slotted between two ribs.

Maybe it isn't a sex thing.

He experiments that week. He starts with masturbation. In the morning. In the bathroom at the office, after lunch. At night, luxuriously - kneeling on the floor, fucking himself slowly on his favorite dildo, porn streaming on his laptop just for the sound. His hand slick with lube, moving warm and slow on his cock. He keeps his eyes closed and thinks of John, the first man he'd fucked at the orgy the other week. The sweet way he'd gasped and shuddered as he came. The clench of his knees around Lan Zhan's hips. The second, whose name had been - who knows, he can't remember, but he'd been so tight at first, he'd squealed when he'd put Lan Zhan inside him and then gotten very quiet, using Lan Zhan's cock to get himself off -

It feels good, but not good enough.

He rolls his neck, strokes his other hand over his belly, enjoys the press of his knees against the cool wood floor. He thinks of Wei

Ying, inevitably. The way it had felt to look up while he was sucking Wei Ying off, the stretch of his thighs and his throat as he worked. The look of fascination on Wei Ying's face as he dragged Lan Zhan to orgasm. He thinks of being fucked, of Wei Ying fucking him - yes, that's better - his hips rolling smoothly, his knees spreading wide so that he can fuck himself deeper, harder - oh - thinking of the bruises that Wei Ying's bony hips would leave on the inside of his thighs - how responsive he was just for a blowjob - how prettily, maybe, he'd beg - if he'd let Lan Zhan bite him, bruise him - if he'd treat Lan Zhan just as rough in return, if Lan Zhan could make him cry - yes, like that - *fuck* -

His whole body seizes as he comes - hard, his hips jerking helpless little circles, chasing sensation between the dildo in his ass and his hand on his cock - his teeth clenched tight to keep from making any sound.

In the morning, everything is normal. There's a ring of three plants in the small of his back, curling up towards his hips like they're growing towards the sun. No bigger or smaller than they usually are. That night he goes to the West Village and suffers through twenty two minutes at Monster before he finds someone cute enough to take home with him.

And it's fine. The sex is good. It's fun, even. The man's name is Mike, and he's as tall as Lan Zhan and twice as broad, and he laughs during sex, up until Lan Zhan makes him cry. He thinks it's funny when Lan Zhan presses him up against the big windows that bracket his bed. He thinks it's funny and also very hot. He talks as they fuck, breathless commentary about the people who could see them if only they looked up. It's good, and he comes before Lan Zhan, and he doesn't mind when Lan Zhan takes off the condom and finishes on his chest.

They've cleaned up, and are laying in Lan Zhan's cool sheets, and he's about to ask Mike to leave when he hears the apartment door unlock.

Mike giggles. In most circumstances Lan Zhan would think it was a charming sort of laugh. "Who's that?" Mike asks.

Lan Zhan listens. He strokes his fingers idly through Mike's hair. He hears the clatter of suitcase wheels rolled into and then abandoned in the kitchen. The muffled sound of voices - just one voice. Lan Huan on the phone. Too fast to be speaking to Mingjue. The soft tone that Lan Zhan hears sometimes through the walls, on late night or early morning WeChat calls. "My brother," he says.

"Is he as gorgeous as you are?" Mike asks.

"More, probably," Lan Zhan says absently. He gets out of bed, pulls on a pair of pajama pants and a soft sleeping shirt. Both are silk, and a gift from their uncle from before they'd come to the US. He ties his hair back automatically as he closes his bedroom door behind him.

Lan Huan is standing at the kitchen counter. His phone is in one hand, showing a video call. Meng Yao's voice is too soft to be heard through his earbuds. Both of them are smiling. The smile doesn't change when Lan Zhan clears his throat.

"A-Zhan!" Lan Huan says. He smiles more, bigger. Showing teeth. He looks at Meng Yao. "I'll call you back in a few minutes. Okay. You too."

"Welcome back," Lan Zhan says.

"What?" Lan Huan says, taking out his earbuds and setting them down on the counter next to his phone.

"Welcome back," Lan Zhan says again, a little louder.

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In the morning there are no plants. It almost feels stranger, at this

point. To have nothing grow at all.

Notes:

Thank you so much to verity and phenlt (and of course Emi as always!) for betaing the third/fourth acts!

Chapter 10

Chapter Text

Like all corporations, there is a meeting after the meeting. There are meetings to plan meetings, and meetings to debrief from the prior meeting. You must circle back, follow up, autopsy.

Now that the samples from Resort have all been approved, there is a handoff meeting. Lan Zhan books one of the conference rooms and receives an almost instant cancellation from Wen Qing. She sends an email: *Just come to my office instead and don't make it weird.*

"Miriam," Lan Zhan says out loud. "Would you mind taking all of the handoff materials down to Wen Qing's office?"

Miriam looks at the pile of materials waiting on the drafting table: specification sheets listing out all materials and measurements, approval samples, strike offs for color, even fat binders stuffed with zipper heads and snaps, so that Wen Qing's assistant managers don't have to run back and forth to the Design department to reconfirm what JLT should be ordering. "Sure, boss," she says, and shakes her head. It takes her three trips to get all of it.

Technically, the handoff meeting is the end of Design's involvement each season. Production will take all of that documentation and tear through it, demanding justification for cost, labor, is there a cheaper nailhead we can use, does the thread *really* have to be silk, can this be a sew-in label instead of a patch, can the print be three colors instead of five. The costing that Lan Zhan has approved will be revisited, requoted, and reapproved. Often, the design itself must bend to Production's will, to stoop below some arbitrary price ceiling that's been decided without Design's consent. Then, and only then, will the trigger be pulled, the big machine of bulk production set in motion, and the ship dates set.

Production is territorial, and brooks no interference from Design *or* Sales. Once the design is approved, it is set in stone, unable to be

changed unless shipment delay is acknowledged and committed to in writing. Lan Zhan can respect that. Most of the time he finds it refreshing, to see someone who is as inflexible and unyielding as he is.

Wen Qing's office is as cluttered as his own. It's a narrower room, holding only herself. Her two lieutenants sit just outside, Production Managers who in turn each manage several Production Assistants and a rotating cast of interns. The other divisions have two or three of Wen Qing's underlings assigned to them, but ORCHiD's production is both small and highly treasured, and had been bestowed upon Wen Qing's unwilling shoulders by the president of Interwoven Apparel himself.

When two o'clock rolls around, Lan Zhan takes himself, his laptop, and a notepad. He walks through the maze of cubicles and doesn't say hello as he goes, except to the receptionist as he takes the interior staircase down to the lower floor. He knocks on Wen Qing's door, even though it's already open.

She waves him in without looking up from her computer, fingertips pointing towards the carpet. His Resort documentation is piled up on a small table, next to the documentation he'd handed over back in October for ORCHiD's Fall collection. He sits down across the desk from her and waits. She keeps personal items scattered about her desk and on the wall: a lumpy ball of glittery clay that he assumes is a child's craft product, a dense collection of family photos pinned to the wall, and some loopy, minimalist crayon drawings. He stares idly at the wall, just to look at something - and after a moment zeroes in on one photo in particular. It's a photo of Wen Qing with a little boy sitting on her shoulders, both of them laughing, sharing similar smiles.

Well - he feels a little foolish, not to have made that connection before.

"So," she says, after a few minutes that she spends furiously typing. "All of this is my problem now."

Lan Zhan says nothing. Wen Qing laces her fingers together on the desk and stares at him. "Okay," she says. "We've hashed most of

this out over email so this meeting is a formality, we don't have to make it anything complicated. Bulk fabric should get to the factory in two weeks so when the strike-offs get *here* I'll coordinate with Miriam for approvals. I have your notes for the two dresses and the lacey items. Everything's been communicated to Meng Yao, and my girls will keep an eye out for any problems when the sales samples come in."

Lan Zhan says nothing. Wen Qing takes a deep breath. "I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

Lan Zhan's fingers clench on his knees. "Bad news," he answers.

"Okay," she says. Her mouth and eyes are hard. "I need to take ten percent off the FOB for five items."

"No," Lan Zhan says.

"It's not up to you," she shoots back. "The MSRP's been set for those styles and your margin already sucked. The mandate came directly from the C-suite. I'll email you the details but I wanted to let you know ahead of time, so you don't come storming back into my office tomorrow."

Lan Zhan breathes out. Tries and fails to let go of his trousers and the thin skin underneath. He looks out Wen Qing's windows, which face to the north. The view stretches exactly as far as across 34th Street and ends abruptly at the next building over. Nothing moves, in the windows of the office across the way. "I'll talk to my brother," he says.

Wen Qing opens her mouth and then closes it. "I have more bad news," she says. "Your ex-factory is July 21st."

"No," Lan Zhan says, stunned. "No, that's not correct. JLT said they'd hold July 15th for us. They already ordered the materials already, they can hold the date."

Wen Qing looks at him, visibly sorting through her thoughts. This is a quality he normally appreciates about her. In meetings she doesn't speak until her arguments are fully formed, her pushback

unassailable. “July 21st is the best I can do,” she says. “They did order the materials, but they have other production coming through for Pparel and Scribble that got booked through first. It took me almost a week going back and forth with Treasure just to keep you in July. We’re subcontracting some of the styles to Yunshen to even be able to make that date.”

“Why not?” Lan Zhan demands. “Meng Yao said he would hold the date. I don’t understand why we’re being pushed back.”

Wen Qing shrugs. “Ask your brother,” she says. “You guys are late on payments.”

Lan Zhan stares at her. She stares back. “Aren’t you excited?” she asks. “That’s your good news, that Yunshen is getting part of the line. I put the Lycra styles with them too.”

Lan Zhan stands. “I need to speak with my brother.”

Her expression shifts. “Okay,” she says. “Well, I’ll email you if we have any questions going through the handoff docs. And - if you -” She makes a face. “I can’t make you any promises,” she threatens. “But let me see what I can do.”

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Lan Zhan walks upstairs in a daze. Late on payments. ORCHiD has never been late on payments. The factory is always paid first, no matter what. It was something that he and his brother agreed on when they first went into business together. That they wouldn’t be like the foreign buyers who came to Yunshen, took their goods, and never paid. Pleading for thirty days more, sixty. A discount on an invoice issued six months ago. Thirty percent demanded reduction. The goods didn’t sell. Our orders are flat. We depend on your

partnership. What choice did Uncle, and their father before him have, except to accept? To swallow the cost of raw materials that they'd ordered based on promises? To pack unfinished goods away and let them molder, waiting for an American to come and make good on them? To plead with their own vendors for credit, to thicken their face and place orders for more zippers, more buttons, more fabric, more promises?

He forgets to say hello to the receptionist. He doesn't notice Paul's greeting in the hallway. He goes to find his brother.

Lan Huan's door is closed. Lan Zhan stares at it for a long moment, dumbfounded. He knocks. There's an abrupt, soft sound from the other side. It might be laughter. The thud of something on the furniture. After a moment, Mingjue opens the door. He's grinning. "A-Zhan!" he says. He sounds genuinely glad to see Lan Zhan. "How's it going?"

Lan Zhan takes a breath, and finds the words stuck in his throat. Over Mingjue's shoulder, his brother is sitting on one of the chairs in front of his desk. His clothing and hair are perfectly ordered. Nothing about him is out of place except for a slight flush around his cheekbones, but it's a hot day. "A-Zhan," Lan Huan says, frowning at him. "Are you okay?"

Mingjue looks back at him, also frowning. He puts a hand on Lan Zhan's shoulder. His hand is big enough that his fingers brush against the side of Lan Zhan's neck, and also a thick scab along his spine. He manages to suppress his flinch, but only barely.

"Gege," Lan Zhan asks, "can I talk to you?"

Mingjue is the first to speak. He says, "Uh, hah. I'll leave you guys to it. A-Zhan, if you need anything, you let me know, okay?" He lifts his hand just far enough to clap it back down on Lan Zhan's shoulder and give him a little shake. He looks over his shoulder. "Xiao-Huan -"

"I'll see you later," Lan Huan says. He doesn't look away from Lan Zhan's face, not as Lan Zhan closes the door behind himself and comes to sit down in the other chair. He studies Lan Zhan, and Lan

Zhan lets himself be studied. They're many years away from when Lan Huan could read Lan Zhan's distress on his face, could diagnose the cause instantly - or maybe they're just older now, and Lan Zhan has worries other than missing their mother and hating their father.

What does Lan Huan see now? Does he see his own lies, reflecting back in Lan Zhan's face? Does he recognize the effect he's had on Lan Zhan, all of the smiles he uses to paper over other people's fears?

Lan Zhan is, he realizes, very angry. So angry that he cannot speak at all, not for long moments. People pass by the closed office door, visible in flashes through the narrow glass window that borders it. He tries to make himself say the words clogging up his throat: ORCHiD is in trouble and you won't tell me. In fact, you have told me the opposite dozens of times. Interwoven has strangled us, and you knew it was happening. You lied to me. You lied to me!

"A-Zhan," Lan Huan says. His tone carries a note of urgency. A thread of real fear. He's looking at Lan Zhan as if he'd found him collapsed somewhere again, shaking in the aftermath of a nightmare, or wound too tightly to sleep. "A-Zhan, what's wrong? What's going on with you?"

Everything. Everything is wrong. The scope of *wrong* is so vast that he would barely know where to start. He wants to laugh, but laughing has never come easily to him. Horribly, he finds himself near tears instead. This again. What is *happening* to him?

Lan Zhan shakes his head. He looks up at his brother and understands that he'll never be able to say any of these things. The accusations, all his questions, pile on top of everything else they've never said to each other, not for more than twenty years. The words press against his lips and dissolve there, leaving himself sickened at even having thought them.

"Are you having a panic attack?" Lan Huan asks. He reaches forward - close enough that Lan Zhan can feel the heat of his brother's skin - and then finally closes his fingers around Lan Zhan's knee. Lan Zhan shakes his head, even as he thinks: yes. Distant and detached beneath everything else that has heaved itself up so

suddenly in his heart. Yes, he's having a panic attack. He doesn't know why. Surely he could have this conversation like an adult. Surely he could open his mouth and *speak*, could say the words. *You lied to me!* But people lie all the time. What is *wrong* with him?

Lan Zhan shakes his head again, as if he could bodily shove all of his feelings back where they came from. Through it all Lan Huan's hand is steady and warm on his knee. Reassuring. Safe. Okay. Lan Zhan puts his hands over his face and breathes deeply. No. No, he's not having a panic attack. It's not happening.

He forces his breathing to slow. It takes a long time. Gradually the blood returns to his fingertips, which ache and tingle as it happens. Without breaking contact, Lan Huan leans over and snags a bottle of water off of his desk, opens it, and hands it to Lan Zhan. The first taste of it on his lips nearly makes Lan Zhan throw up. He drinks it anyway.

"Are you okay?" Lan Huan asks, after a while.

Lan Zhan thinks for a moment of putting his hand over Lan Huan's but he can't make himself do it. He probes at his emotions like an infected tooth and manages to say, "Why are we late on payments to JLT?"

Lan Huan's expression does something complicated, caught somewhere between worry and a dense irritation. He sighs, blowing the long parts of his bangs off his face. "Accounting has been a *nightmare* lately," he says. He sounds genuinely angry. "Payable is holding payments out until they've reconciled last month's ecomm sales. I would swear they're doing it on purpose. I'm sorry, A-Zhan. I only got the email from A-Yao this morning about the delivery date slipping. I was going to come talk to you about it after your Production meeting."

Lan Zhan looks at his brother through his hands. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe he's never been able to tell when Lan Huan lies to him. Maybe it's just never mattered. If he went downstairs to ask the Finance team, what would they say? That ORCHiD never paid late? That they were profitable? That the business was growing, the way that they'd hoped - instead of these confusing contractions? Cost of

goods sold. The way that their debt piles up every season, in excess inventory and leftover materials and the way he and his brother have become so much smaller than they'd hoped to be.

He -

He doesn't believe Lan Huan.

There's nothing in his brother's face that says he's lying, but Lan Zhan doesn't believe him, all the same.

He takes a deep breath. It feels clogged and wet and *green* in his lungs, and for a moment it feels almost like relief. That if the vines are growing in his lungs then maybe he can rest. Maybe all of this will stop. But it's only a moment, and by the time he exhales it's gone.

The words that come next surprise him, but maybe they shouldn't. They've been in his mouth for a long time now. "You need to tell Mingjue about Meng Yao," he says.

Lan Huan's hand spasms around Lan Zhan's knee and then lifts away. He sits back in his chair. Lan Zhan leans forward in response, pursuing him. He says, "Mingjue really cares about you. He thinks you two are exclusive. This isn't fair to him." He doesn't say, this isn't fair to Meng Yao, because he's said that before, many times. When they argued about the man Lan Huan was dating before Mingjue, and the one before that. These are things they've talked about, but only in distant ways, because Meng Yao himself is distant. He lives literally on the other side of the world, in a country that now they only visit. He's an abstract concept instead of a relationship, even though at three years it's the longest one Lan Huan has ever had.

"A-Zhan," Lan Huan says, very evenly. "My relationship with Mingjue is not your business."

"Mingjue *made it* my business," Lan Zhan says desperately. "He wants to hang out again. He wants to be friends. He's serious about you, gege. Please."

Lan Huan looks at him. Lan Zhan has never been good at reading people, not ever, and especially not Lan Huan. He's wondered sometimes if that is the real difference between the two of them, the childhood they did and didn't share. Lan Huan had three more years with their parents, and it taught him to smile.

"Do you not want to be friends with Mingjue?" Lan Huan asks.

Lan Zhan could scream. "I don't want to be in the middle," he says, but that's not quite right either, is it? "I don't want him to be hurt." Closer. But not right either. He forces his fear out between his teeth. "I don't want to see you hurt him."

Lan Huan looks away. He stands up and puts distance between them, going behind his desk and then fitfully moving to stand near the window. "A-Zhan," he says, and shakes his head. "Don't make this harder on me. You - " He shakes his head again.

Lan Zhan flinches. As hard as if Lan Huan had physically struck him. "What?" he says. The word fumbles itself out of his mouth. That doesn't make sense. Why would he -? "I'm not trying to," he says, "I only want -"

"Don't," Lan Huan says.

He doesn't raise his voice. He never does. The two of them don't argue like people in Shanghai do. They grew up loving expensive clothes and pale skin but they keep their arguments close to the heart, so soft that some of Lan Huan's boyfriends hadn't realized they were fighting at all. Once, Lan Huan had made a joke about it. "We got enough shouting when we were little kids," he'd said, and laughed in a way that made Lan Zhan stand up and walk out of the room.

Lan Zhan sits back in his chair. His fingertips flex numbly on the arm rests. "I'm sorry," he says.

Lan Huan doesn't say anything. He stares out the window. His hand makes a fist in the small of his back.

Lan Zhan stands.

He hesitates just for a second, in case Lan Huan wants to say anything else.

He closes the door behind himself when he leaves.

He walks to his own office automatically. Miriam is not at her desk. He can't remember if she has a meeting. Maybe she's gone to lunch. The studio is empty, that's all that matters. He sits at his desk and stares blankly at his computer screen, which is powered down and only gives his own face back to him. He wants to leave. He wants to leave his phone behind and just leave. To walk down the length of Fifth Avenue until he runs out of concrete and skyscrapers.

Don't make this harder on me.

Lan Zhan's arms itch. He taps at his keyboard to wake his computer up. He doesn't notice as a tiny, tender shoot pushes its way out from under his collarbone. He won't notice until the morning, when he pushes one hand beneath his pajama bottoms and the other over his chest to play with his nipples, and his fingers find a knot of vines over his heart first.

Now, he glares at his computer screen, coldly furious. He won't make it harder, not for anyone. If Interwoven wants to strangle them, Lan Zhan will fight back. He will work harder. He'll do better. Resort will sell. Spring will be even better. Spring is truer, more beautiful than anything he's done for years. Spring has *vision*. Even Lan Huan said so. He will make this work.

There are three emails in his inbox from other Interwoven brands, asking if he could release some of ORCHiD's patterns to them, for use in their own Spring collections. They ask this every season, every year. Lan Zhan has copyrighted every print he's ever designed, regardless of whether they end up on a finished garment. The first year in New York he had fought endless battles to keep ORCHiD's intellectual property within their own brand; to remind Interwoven that their back catalog had never been a part of the agreement. He deletes them without reply, as he always does.

Chapter 11

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

The photographer's studio is near Madison Square Park - close enough that Lan Zhan has paid a company that does such things to load all of his garments onto two racks, cover them with a thick sheet of plastic, walk them physically down the fifteen blocks or so, and then at 4:30pm walk everything back to the Empire State Building. He and Wei Ying are also walking.

Wei Ying meets Lan Zhan at ORCHiD's office. Lan Zhan has been in the office since 6:30, doing last minute checks to ensure that all sequins, all embroidery, all seams, everything looks perfect. He's worked with this photographer before and while her work is good, she keeps no equipment on hand for any mid-shoot fixes. He has also packed a rescue kit that includes nearly every thread color in the studio.

Wei Ying hands him an iced coffee as he comes out of the revolving doors; Lan Zhan hands him a pastry bag. "Lung Moon!" Wei Ying exclaims happily, and immediately digs out a steamed bun. "You spoil me, Lan Zhan." Lan Zhan angles the straw into his mouth and drinks deeply. This morning Wei Ying is wearing possibly the silliest shirt Lan Zhan has seen him in yet, which he recognizes with some agony as also being Westwood; it says, *HE WHO LIVES BY THE SWORD*, and Wei Ying has cut the sleeves off of it, along with most of the sides. His ribs become visible as he moves his arms. His shorts are very short, and have raw hems, even though Lan Zhan distinctly remembers Wei Ying complaining about unfinished hems when they first met. He watches Wei Ying look him up and down - take in the lace jacket, the mesh shirt underneath, the cropped pants, the spiked Louboutin slip ons - and then visibly swallow

whatever has to say about that.

Lan Zhan is enjoying this.

New York in June takes on an aura. There's a thickening of the air - as if you're walking through a constant mist, composed mostly of thick sludge of hot garbage aerosolized. The subways stink of piss even across the street from an entrance. There has been a sharp influx of tourists, especially around the Empire State Building, who crowd around the red-jacketed hawkers and demand double decker bus tickets. Groups of them are whisked gawking into the public doors of the building, to wait on what Lan Zhan has been informed is three separate lines to get to the top. He's never been. Four years in New York City, working in this building, and he's never been to the top of it. He wouldn't even have to wait on line to get there.

It's a nice walk despite the smell, and once they get down into the 20s the crowd on the street changes from tourists to people trying to sell them knock off watches and handbags. Wei Ying fills the walk with chatter. Mostly about his son, and the trials and tribulations of pre-K. But when Wei Ying asks how Lan Zhan has been, Lan Zhan surprises himself by saying, "I had a fight with my brother."

Wei Ying winces in sympathy. "Ahh, my sympathies," he says. "Did you guys make up yet?"

Lan Zhan shrugs. He tries to sip from his coffee, but it's empty. The plastic crinkles under his hand. "We had dinner together last night, but we didn't talk about the fight," he says.

"Oh, hmm," Wei Ying says, nodding. He looks sidelong at Lan Zhan. "What was it about?"

Lan Zhan takes a breath, crinkles his plastic cup, and finally detours to throw it away. "Work," he offers, returning to Wei Ying's orbit. Surprisingly, Wei Ying laughs.

"I can't even *imagine* going into business with my brother," he says. "Not even when we were actually speaking to each other. You Lan boys are so brave."

Without the coffee cup, Lan Zhan's hands feel annoyingly empty. "You don't speak to your brother?"

Wei Ying's smile fades. Ah, he'd let that slip by accident. "Well," he says. The words fumble out into the gritty summer air. "Not right now, no. But hopefully that'll change! We used to fight all the time anyway. We're really good at making up, so - I'm not worried. I'm not. He'll come around."

"How long has it been?" Lan Zhan asks. Wei Ying dodges around a bicycle messenger riding dead-eyed in the middle of the sidewalk, and makes a slow arc back to Lan Zhan's side. They're close enough that Wei Ying's shoulder almost, almost brushes his own.

"Five years," Wei Ying admits. "Ish."

Lan Zhan stops dead. Wei Ying's feet slow just ahead of him. When he looks back over his shoulder at Lan Zhan it's with an expression of dread, which Lan Zhan notices half a second too late to stop himself from demanding, "He's never met A-Yuan?"

Wei Ying blinks. Shakes his head. Looks away. The smile on his face is reflexive-looking, and deeply familiar. Lan Zhan has seen it on his brother countless times before. "That's awful," Lan Zhan informs him.

Wei Ying laughs. He runs a hand over the top of his hair, which is tied into a messy knot. "He, well," he says, "he has his reasons. I did a lot of - I don't blame him."

Lan Zhan starts walking again, too angry to stay still. Wei Ying falls back into step with him. "It's your business," Lan Zhan says stiffly, after half a block of silence. "But I think it's different if there are children involved. It's selfish."

"It's not up to me," Wei Ying says softly. He smiles at Lan Zhan like a peace offering. "You have a lot of opinions about family, huh?"

Lan Zhan looks away. "I'm sorry if I overstepped."

"No! No no," Wei Ying says. Alarmingly, he reaches across the thin distance between them and curls a hand around Lan Zhan's wrist.

Lan Zhan is afraid to look at it, for fear that he'll take it away. "No, it's fine. It's fine. It's nice. I have a lot of opinions about family too, hah." Wei Ying is also not looking at him, a set to his jaw like it's on purpose, and his hand is warm and dry and still on Lan Zhan's wrist. It all feels very absurd, walking down Fifth Avenue like this. He loves it. He knows - he reminds himself sharply - that Wei Ying has set a boundary between them, and Lan Zhan won't cross it. But it's - it's such a simple touch. Wei Ying isn't pulling or directing him, but if he did, Lan Zhan would follow.

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The photographer's studio is on the top floor of a grand stone building, with a white marble lobby and a curling staircase and an elevator lined in brass fixtures, which is also the size of a closet. It shakes horribly as they ascend, enough that Wei Ying turns to Lan Zhan and cheerfully says, "What an Instagrammable place to die!" But of course they don't; the elevator groans and shudders and lurches every few feet until it finally spits them out into the sun-soaked studio.

The clothing has arrived, and is waiting patiently in the corner, more patiently than their photographer, who barks at Wei Ying to get undressed immediately after Lan Zhan introduces them.

"I'm sorry," Lan Zhan tells him. There's no place to change, so they stand behind the garment rack to dress and do Wei Ying's makeup. It's not any more naked than Wei Ying gets in Lan Zhan's studio, but there are significantly more people around; theirs is not the only photoshoot happening in the studio this morning. "I usually work with the owner of the studio, but she was booked today."

Wei Ying laughs. "It's normal," he says. His back arches as Lan Zhan

drags the zipper up his spine. He holds his hair out of Lan Zhan's way. Lan Zhan had gone minimal for Wei Ying's makeup: a strong brow, a neutral lip. Red and orange around the eyes, just enough to gesture at the image of a strung out model. It's about as much makeup as Lan Zhan wears himself, when he feels like wearing makeup. Wei Ying turns and flashes Lan Zhan a smile over his shoulder. "Not everyone expects the mannequin to be a real boy, you know."

A drop cloth has been laid out, and a canvas background. Wei Ying goes and stands in the center of the drop cloth, his hands by his sides, his best apathetic expression fixed to his face. The photographer directs him to face forward, face to the side, turn away. Hold still while he moves in close for detail shots, mostly at Lan Zhan's request. The outfit is the star, and the point. These are the photos that Lan Huan will take to meetings with him, printed on thick, glossy paper with as much definition as they can manage, so that the retail buyers can see all of the exquisite detail, the why to buy: what makes ORCHiD's Resort collection special.

"Please photograph the bottom of the sleeves," Lan Zhan says.

As he hands over the next piece, he says, "Two closeups of the embroidery, please."

As each look is photographed, Lan Zhan chooses the next. He assembles outfits in various configurations. He undresses and redresses Wei Ying. He tidies as he works, hanging any pieces back on the rack that won't be photographed again. Whenever he looks up to gauge the photographer's progress, Wei Ying makes silly faces at him.

"How's it all looking?" Wei Ying asks during a break. Even in the indirect light of the studio, he's a little sweaty. Lan Zhan gives him a bottle of water, which he takes with an amused look.

"Fine," Lan Zhan says pensively. It does look fine. It looks simple. Shooting a lookbook is much easier than shooting editorial. There's no storyline, no props, no complicated lighting, no fantasy. There was only one year that they shot editorial, which was ORCHiD's first year in New York, when Interwoven had practically thrown

money at them. He wants that again. He wants to get back to that place.

“What are you thinking?” Wei Ying asks, with a smile in his voice. He drinks deeply and grins at Lan Zhan, his chin tipped up, his posture terrible.

“It needs,” Lan Zhan says, tapping his fingers against the steel rack, “something more.”

Wei Ying looks at him consideringly. “Something more?” He shrugs. “Okay, I can do something more.”

Lan Zhan looks up at him, and Wei Ying grins. “Just watch me,” he says. “Don’t look away from me, okay?”

“Okay,” Lan Zhan echoes.

Wei Ying waterfalls the rest of the bottle into his mouth. He shrugs on the bolero jacket that Lan Zhan is holding out for him, and goes to resume his place. As the photographer gets the camera ready, he looks up, holds Lan Zhan’s eyes, and mouths, *watch me.*

So Lan Zhan does.

He watches Wei Ying transform.

His shoulders drop. His spine curls. His mouth slackens, opens with precision. His tongue darts out to wet his lower lip. His eyes -

Lan Zhan exhales.

Even if Wei Ying hadn’t ordered him to watch, he wouldn’t have been able to look away.

A good model doesn’t need big movements to sell clothes, anymore than Lan Zhan needs to draw faces or feet to create them. Fashion is a gesture, an illusion, aspiration distilled: these things are known. The science of *want* is known, studied by generations of advertisers, dictated to consumers so all-encompassingly that it controls even the shape of ice cream containers. Lan Zhan, too, has studied this. He swims in the waters of consumer psychology just as much as

retail math, pattern-making, knitting, business planning, everything that's not pure creation. He can describe ORCHiD's target customer down to their grocery shopping habits. He thinks of that person as he works: the dates or meetings or indulgences that will make them reach for *his* clothing over any other, the small details that will make them smile, the cuts that will make them feel confident. But the clothes are only ever a part of what sells them.

There are so many things a good model can do to lengthen their silhouette, to showcase the clothing, to turn an elbow or a neck or a hand into something sculptural, something inhuman, something *wanted*. Wei Ying does all of these things. He cocks his shoulders, moves his chin in infinitesimal increments, and Lan Zhan *wants*. He's watching Wei Ying come alive under the camera, all of his rangy, exaggerated proportions locking into smooth focus that will draw the eye here, here, and here. At core, Wei Ying is not doing so much more than he was already. He's still mostly only standing there on the drop cloth laid out for them, but his eyes are locked on Lan Zhan's, hot and all consuming, and his body holds a level of tension that feels like it will break Lan Zhan in half.

When Wei Ying bounces over for the next look, all he says is, "More?"

Lan Zhan, breathless, can only say, "Yes."

Wei Ying winks at him, vanishes from between Lan Zhan's hands, and it starts all over again.

Lan Zhan has been asked, of course, if he models. Many times over the length of his career - before it, even. The business he's in, the way he looks and the way that people see him - of course they ask. The answer that he gives is no, and the reality more complicated, because he had: twice for print work, once on a runway. And then never again, because he knew himself well enough to know that he lacked the subtlety for it. He has never known how to make someone want him except to be exactly as he is.

Wei Ying is a good model. Lan Zhan already knew this. He'd seen Wei Ying's CV, had written down his technical feedback as gospel during their fittings. He still feels hilariously unprepared to see him

actually *model*.

The rest of the shoot goes smoothly. A little slower since Lan Zhan spends the time watching Wei Ying instead of assembling the next outfit and reorganizing, but they still finish ten minutes ahead of schedule. Lan Zhan repacks his samples in a daze as Wei Ying gets dressed. He nods as the photographer reconfirms the timeline for delivery of the edited photos, the prices for printed booklets that Lan Zhan approved two weeks ago, and gives him a brusque nod. "It looks really good," the photographer says, and with that they're done.

As soon as the brass doors of the elevator are closed behind them, Wei Ying starts laughing. He's bouncing on his toes. "Ahh, that was so much fun!" he crows. He also sounds breathless. His cheeks are flushed. He forgets himself enough to throw an arm around Lan Zhan's shoulders. "I haven't done that in so long. You're really fun to work with, you know that, Lan Zhan?"

Lan Zhan twitches. His hands are folded in proper elevator posture. "Um," he manages disgracefully, but at least it's not, *no one has ever called me fun before*, or *you were incredible*, or *I would love to eat you out in this elevator*. Their faces are very close. Wei Ying's hip is digging into his own hip. The bare skin of his ribs is pressed against the lace of Lan Zhan's jacket. His arm flexes against the back of Lan Zhan's neck. The elevator cranks and grinds its way down an unknowable amount of floors. It is, Lan Zhan agrees, a very Instagrammable place to die.

"Hey," Wei Ying says suddenly. His mouth is so close to Lan Zhan's that he feels a puff of air against his own. "Are you hungry? You wanna grab some lunch? I mean, I've got some time before I need to pick A-Yuan up from daycare. There's this really good chicken spot around the corner from here. It's just fast food but it's really good. You wanna get something to eat? My treat. Not a date! Just as, you know. Hah."

"Yes," Lan Zhan says. Yes, he knows. Just as friends.

-

In retrospect, maybe going to Birreria instead was a stupid choice. Lan Zhan has been to Eataly before - a sprawling maze hunkered down kitty-corner to the Flatiron Building, which pretends to be an Italian grocery store and is usually so crushingly, panic-inducing crowded that it gives Lan Zhan pleasant flashbacks to Shanghai night markets. He leads Wei Ying past pastry cases, coffee bars, a dizzying array of cheese, live lobster, the disquieting appearance of geoduck, an entire wood fired pizza oven, more types of jarred pasta sauce than have a reason to exist, and finally to a discrete set of elevators guarded by a smiling host.

“Two for lunch?” she asks, and graciously gestures them past the velvet rope. As her sleeve falls down along her wrist Lan Zhan can see something growing there, that looks like grass. He looks away immediately.

The elevator ride up is significantly more smooth, and also much less charming looking: just smooth steel walls, as impersonal as the elevators at the Empire State Building. The doors open up to an industrial looking staircase, which separates the rooftop restaurant from the bathrooms, and from there they join another queue to actually be seated. It’s already very loud.

Wei Ying leans over, fully into Lan Zhan’s space, and whispers, “Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan, you fancy bitch. I have chicken spot money, not fancy bitch money, what are you doing to me?”

“I will pay,” Lan Zhan whispers back, perfectly serene, and then says to the second host, “Yes, two please.”

He’d remembered the restaurant being beautiful, and it is. It’s a wide, modern sort of space, covered with roof panels that can be opened or closed for the weather. Lan Huan and he had come here

their first year in New York, and he'd liked the food and the wine, and the cinematic feel of it: hemmed in by just enough skyscrapers to remind you where you are, but not so much that the wind can't reach down and ruffle your hair as you lift up the clear balloon of a wine glass. What surprises him are the flowers.

The entire restaurant is covered in flowers. The steel pillars are covered with vines. Clumps of drying, fragrant stalks hang thick from the beams. He and his brother had come in early fall, but in summer apparently the heat lamps have been replaced by arbors, which you have to walk through in order to get to your seat. In their case: the bar. The tables are full of young people taking photographs of their food, their friends, the flowers. They sling their legs over spindly stools and put their elbows against the cool white marble of the bar, which is also mostly occupied. Paper menus are slid across to them by an unimpressed bartender.

"You know," Wei Ying says, "for a not-date, this sure is nice."

"If I was taking you on a date," Lan Zhan says, studying his menu, "you would know."

Wei Ying makes a strangled sort of laugh. Good. Lan Zhan feels a little disoriented still, between the whiplash of the photoshoot and the thick coating of flowers everywhere he looks, but it always feels steadying to see Wei Ying blush. Lan Zhan passes him the wine menu. Wei Ying immediately passes it back.

"Ah," Lan Zhan says. "Sorry. You have to pick up your son later. I should have asked."

"No, uh," Wei Ying says, and laughs again. This one is strange. Lan Zhan has heard a lot of different laughs from Wei Ying over the last few weeks, and he doesn't think he's heard this one before. "No, I don't drink. At all."

His shoulder is tense against Lan Zhan's. "Sorry," Lan Zhan says again. And then, because the silence itself is also tense he offers, "I'm not very good at drinking. It's nice not to."

The corner of Wei Ying's mouth twitches up. "Hmm," he says. "I

bet. I hear things about how businessmen drink in China."

"It is," Lan Zhan says, and sighs, "mandatory."

The grin steals across Wei Ying's face like sunrise. "Oooh," he says. "Sounds like there's some stories there."

"Only very boring ones," Lan Zhan says, and Wei Ying laughs.

"How did you and your brother end up running your own business, anyway?" he asks. He leans on his elbow so he can look at Lan Zhan more fully, and also box out a pair of girls who are trying to encroach on their section of the bar. "You were pretty young, weren't you?"

Lan Zhan has been asked this many times, in many places. Fashion loves the illusion of a prodigy. To Wei Ying, he allows the truth. "My brother and I filed for the business license the same month I graduated college," he says. "But it was only what was expected. If we didn't create our own line, we would have just continued to work for our uncle in some capacity. Our family has been in textiles for almost two hundred years."

Wei Ying's eyebrows go up. "Wow, that's," he says, and is interrupted by the bartender, come to take their orders. "Oh, shit, I didn't even look at the menu. Ummm, well, how's the pork shoulder sandwich? Good? Okay, I'll get one of those."

"The chicken, please," Lan Zhan says, and hands back their collected menus, damp from condensation on the bar.

"Two hundred years," Wei Ying says, as the bartender vanishes as quickly as she'd come. "The whole time? Wow."

"During the Cultural Revolution, we made school uniforms," Lan Zhan says. "Afterwards, we made lingerie."

"You're smiling," Wei Ying says. Is he? Wei Ying is smiling, though it seems childish to point it out. He is though: tipped onto his side, his face turned up towards Lan Zhan's. A lock of hair has escaped from his bun, but to push it off his face Lan Zhan would need to give up his own carefully parceled out plot of the bar. He places his

hands gently around the edges of a napkin instead. “What makes you smile, Lan Zhan? Is it the school uniforms or the lingerie?”

Lan Zhan shakes his head. It’s a silly question. The look on Wei Ying’s face says he knows it is. But there’s a seed of truth in it, maybe. “Just memories,” he admits. “My brother and I spent a lot of time at Yunshen when we were children. Our mother, she -”

He stops talking, surprised at himself. After a moment, Wei Ying prompts, “She what?”

Lan Zhan can’t look at him. He forces himself to inhale. “She taught me to sew,” he says. He blows the air out through his nose, very slowly. “I’ve never wanted to do anything except make clothes. I went to college because my uncle insisted, but there was never any question about what I would do afterwards. This is all I’ve ever done.”

A man stumbles too close to the bar, knocking into Lan Zhan. Without looking away, Wei Ying reaches out one long arm and pushes the man away. It’s getting more crowded the closer they get to the end of the work day. The level of noise, which was loud to begin with and is reaching a fever pitch, makes them lean in closer to each other to be heard. Wei Ying’s shoulder presses fully against his own; they’re locked together from hip to knee. Lan Zhan has never been so grateful for the cloak of privacy that language gives him. He doesn’t want to stop talking. He feels afraid in an absurd sort of way: that Wei Ying will ask more questions about his mother (or that he won’t), that some white person will turn around and accuse them of keeping secrets, that Lan Zhan will trespass across the line Wei Ying drew between them. But he doesn’t want to stop talking.

“What does your family think about you and your brother being queer?” Wei Ying asks. He uses the English word for it, instead of any of the Chinese words or phrases or slang he might have chosen otherwise. Maybe that’s just the context he has for it: American by nature, or by default. “You seem like a pretty traditional boy, but you’re out there on Grindr with only *dates* listed for what you’re looking for.”

Lan Zhan frowns at him. “We don’t talk about it,” he says. It seems obvious enough to him. “Our uncle gets ORCHiD’s quarterly financial reports. He knows that we’re,” the words catch in his throat, “doing well.”

Wei Ying laughs for real this time, hard enough that he rolls his forehead over the curve of his bicep. “Quarterly reports? Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, oh my god. Okay, alright, that’s not so surprising,” he says. He laughs again. “So what do *you* think about you being queer?”

Lan Zhan stares at him, feeling out of his depth. The bartender refills their waters grudgingly. Most of the flowers around them are fake, but Lan Zhan’s nose itches anyway. His back itches. “What about you?” he asks.

“Me?” Wei Ying rears up a bit in surprise. “Oh, what does my family think?” He flaps a hand around, careful in the compressed space not to knock over someone else’s glass. “Being bisexual is like, the least of their problems with me. But I don’t really know. I never knew my parents, and I was always a disappointment to my foster parents anyway.” He shrugs. “I’m kind of fucked no matter how I think about it. My sister supports me, anyway. Yanli. That helps a lot. Besides her, the only people I have to answer to are my son and myself.”

“That sounds lonely,” Lan Zhan says, even though it’s not so different for him, not really. All he has is his uncle, his brother, and himself.

Wei Ying only smiles in acknowledgement. It is lonely. They both know it’s lonely.

“I was never … I don’t think I would make a good husband to anyone, even I wasn’t gay,” Lan Zhan says finally. Wei Ying makes a soft questioning noise, but thankfully lets it be. “I’m filial in other ways.”

“Because you carry on the family business,” Wei Ying says. It’s not quite a question.

Lan Zhan shakes his head. “It was my mother’s dream to own a fashion company,” he says, and then can’t make himself say anything more. Maybe Wei Ying hears it anyway: the shape of the father that Lan Zhan has never spoken of, to him or anyone. Even growing up, his father’s name was never said out loud. Lan Zhan wouldn’t know it at all except for seeing it on the family altar, and occasionally on old shipping invoices he would come across at Yunshen.

“That’s nice,” Wei Ying says. An inane comment, maybe. Maybe Lan Zhan is just primed to hear the warmth in it, the understanding.

Wei Ying regards him for a moment, chewing on his lip. “I was a terrible husband,” he says finally, and laughs. “I guess that’s an awkward thing to say to someone that you’re, you know, but in my defense you did start it.”

“What do I know?” Lan Zhan asks softly. Wei Ying says nothing, just chews more on his lip. Lan Zhan leans closer, giving up centimeters of space between them. Up on the rooftop the air is cool and smells of craft beer and flowers, and maybe a little bit of the ghost of Wei Ying’s cologne, his skin. “What are you trying to say, Wei Ying?”

Wei Ying laughs again. “I,” he says, and laughs. “I -”

He tenses all over. For a moment Lan Zhan is sure he’ll pull away - put that distance between them again, all smiles - but Wei Ying blows out a breath and relaxes by tiny increments, so fine that he almost looks like he’s shivering. “I wasn’t actually married,” he says. “To A-Yuan’s mom, I mean. We just -” He shakes his head. “She was a model too, that’s how we met. All we had in common was partying. We were - really, really bad for each other.”

It’s Lan Zhan who pulls away. Wei Ying watches him do it, smiling, resigned. “What do you mean?” Lan Zhan asks. “Did you -” He’s afraid to ask. To say the words.

Wei Ying shakes his head. Laughs, unaware of the wreckage he’s making of Lan Zhan’s insides. “No,” he says. “Well, I mean, she hit *me* a couple times, but I, you know - I pushed her buttons a lot. But

that wasn't -" He sighs, and finally pushes himself up off the bar. His posture mirrors Lan Zhan's, turned towards each other. "I wasn't a nice person, back then. I don't think you would have liked me much."

Lan Zhan eyes him carefully, trying to figure out what he's not saying. "You don't drink anymore," he tests, and Wei Ying nods.

"Yeah," he says. He rubs a hand over his mouth. "Fifteen months sober. You know what that means, right?"

Lan Zhan nods, a little faintly. From television, mostly. He doesn't have much experience with addiction, with addicts. It seems like there would be a lot of variables to consider. As a concept it feels like a big blank wall: unknowable what's on the other side. "And you…" he says, and trails off. What is the right thing to say here? What do Americans expect, when they confess this kind of thing? He doesn't know how traditional Wei Ying's upbringing might have been. He doesn't always know how to thread the line with people like Wei Ying and Mingjue, who are often the same but sometimes so different, and he has missed these steps before. Hell, even in Shanghai people thought that Lan Zhan was uptight. He wants to be kind. He wants to kindly tell Wei Ying that it doesn't matter to him, and he should probably not mention it again. He tries to imagine what Lan Huan would say. He tries to think of what Wei Ying would want to hear.

"Is that why you don't do runway anymore?" Lan Zhan asks, finally. It's the first thing that pops into his head, because he had wondered that, looking over Wei Ying's CV, and then today - how he'd transformed under the camera. He had walked for good brands, big names. Not always in New York, too - Singapore, Milan, London. But the last few years: only fit modeling. He'd thought maybe Wei Ying had just aged out of it, had gotten tired of traveling, had wanted time with his son.

Wei Ying nods. "Daytime hours," he says. "No partying. No afterparties. Show up to an office and leave in time to get the kid from daycare with all the other nine to fivers. Plus, it pays really well? Enough to cover rent and tuition and A-Yuan's health insurance." He shrugs, tense around the mouth.

Lan Zhan nods. It makes sense. It's smart. It's disappointing, in a small, personal way. He'd wanted to ask Wei Ying to walk for him. ORCHiD isn't showing at Fashion Week this year, but maybe next year - maybe for Spring -

He folds that dream up and tucks it away, where he won't think of it anymore. Says instead, as lightly as he can, "I like who you are you now."

Wei Ying's eyes widen. His blush starts at the tip of his nose and blooms across his face. He opens his mouth and says nothing. It's the first time Lan Zhan has seen him speechless. Lan Zhan looks away, pleased. "Our food is here," he says. "Sit properly." He nudges Wei Ying with his elbow, and the soft squeak Wei Ying lets out is very satisfying.

The food is passable. The bar is very loud and bright, and after a while Wei Ying starts sneezing from whatever portion of the flowers are real. He laughs and complains about the weather, and his allergies, and Wei Yuan's daycare and the sniffle he came home with yesterday, and it's nice. It's so nice. Lan Zhan listens, and nods, and thinks of telling him about Shanghai in the summer, the way the sun sears right through you, the bob and flow of parasols and suncovers clogging up the sidewalks, the shocking relief of summer storms. He could - he can taste the words on his lips, and they've talked about Shanghai before. He wants to take Wei Ying there. He wants so many things.

It must be - *freeing*, to be able to tell people things. To just say things, out loud, and have them heard. It seems like it must be beautiful. It had been hard, obviously - for Wei Ying to share even that much with him, that bit of raw honesty. He looks lighter for it. As he talks he steals glances at Lan Zhan, and then makes faces at himself. It's nice. For a moment - a meal - there's nothing else that really matters, and maybe that's why Lan Zhan lets all of those *wants* sit in his heart, for just a moment: because more than anything, he wants to share his own story, the core of him - the things he's never even spoken about with his own brother. The terrible times they were both there for, the years that only Lan Huan remembers. All that Lan Zhan knows about how their mother died is what was told to him. The barest details. Hardly any more

than what presumably went into the police report. He thinks of telling Wei Ying about them.

He doesn't. But he thinks about it.

Notes:

> Thank you so much to capucapu for the sensitivity read on this chapter!

Chapter 12

Chapter Text

“Are you ready?”

Lan Zhan takes a deep breath. “Do it,” he says.

Lan Huan hits the button to connect.

After a moment, Wen Qing’s face comes up on the screen. Behind her is a kitchen, very tidy. Her hair is up in a bun, her face bare of makeup. She’s wearing a worn sweatshirt. “Hey,” she says, and then nothing else, her attention turned off screen. On their side of the city, Lan Huan is unbothered. He sets the bottle of champagne between his knees and twists off the wire cage, wiggles the cork out to make a muted pop. “Wen Qing?” he asks, filling Lan Zhan’s glass and then his own.

She snorts. “My nephew’s been throwing up all day,” she says, and lifts a plastic bottle, mostly empty. “All I’ve got here is Pedialyte.”

Lan Zhan frowns. “Is he okay?” he demands. Lan Huan and Wen Qing both look at him strangely. Before Wen Qing can reply, the screen splits and Meng Yao joins the call.

“Good morning, A-Yao!” Lan Huan says, smiling. He lifts his champagne glass. “Are you celebrating with us?”

Meng Yao dimples and lifts his own drink, which looks to be a mug of green tea. “It’s well-earned,” he says.

Lan Huan doesn’t look at his brother. Lan Zhan doesn’t look at him. They sit stiffly beside each other, while Lan Huan smiles and makes small talk with Meng Yao. They haven’t - *talked* about their argument. Not really. That night, Lan Huan made noodles with white soup, Lan Zhan’s favorite. They ate sitting at the counter. After dinner they watched an old Hong Kong gangster movie on

Netflix. Lan Huan had fallen asleep on the couch. Lan Zhan had covered him with a blanket before he'd gone to sleep himself, and when he'd woke up in the morning the apartment was empty. Since then, they've talked about work. Since then, he hasn't seen Mingjue once.

The actual meeting is perfunctory. Everything has been sent over email already - approvals for design, costing, order quantities, ex-factory date. Meng Yao had emailed Lan Zhan about the last one personally, the day before: the goods will leave JLT on July 18th. An improvement of three days. It's better than nothing. The schedule allows for a faster boat, the one that leaves only twice a week: ultimately it will save them nearly a week. There's always something left to talk through, every season. For Resort, it's the subcontracting arrangement to Yunshen. Yes, the bulk fabrics have been sent to Suzhou already. No, they haven't received all of the trims yet, but Yunshen can cut everything while they're waiting on zippers and buttons. Meng Yao has already been on the phone twice with Yunshen's manager this morning, to confirm the schedule.

"We still want QC on all of JLT's styles before anything ships," Lan Zhan warns.

"Of course," Meng Yao agrees. His dimples, never very far away, make another appearance. "We've already been in contact with the nominated lab about it. They'll be coming for the in-line inspection around - ahhh, around July 1st. We'll make the rest of the bookings once we have the passed report."

"Hmm," Lan Zhan says. He's holding the champagne flute between his fingers. The sour smell of it tickles his nose.

"Did you fix the skewing problem you were having, on the Chrysanthemum Jacket?" Wen Qing asks. She takes a sip of her own drink, which is probably hot water, rather than the last mouthful of Pedialyte.

Meng Yao beams. "We did! It turned out to be quite simple. The salesman samples should all be sent out tomorrow. I apologize for the delay."

“It’s fine,” Lan Huan says. “We’re looking forward to receiving them.”

Meng Yao’s smile softens, just for a moment - just long enough for Lan Zhan to recognize the look before it’s gone, hidden back behind Meng Yao’s thick, professional veneer. “Well,” he says, “if there’s nothing else, we’ll start cutting fabric today. Congratulations and best wishes for another successful season, Lao Lan. Lao Wen.” Another flicker of something else in his face, as delicate a dragonfly. “Lao Huan.”

Lan Huan lifts his champagne glass again. Lan Zhan echoes the gesture. Wen Qing doesn’t seem to notice, distracted by someone off camera. “Ganbei!” he says, and everyone except for Wen Qing drinks.

-

In the morning, Lan Zhan makes a stop on his way to work. He has his purchase gift-wrapped. He walks to work and nods at the guard in the employee lobby, the sparkling, brightly colored gift bag swinging from his fingertips. He sets it on his desk and bends himself to the sewing machine for one and a half hours. At ten fifteen he gets up, tidies his work station, and takes the gift bag downstairs to Wen Qing’s office. Her office door is open; she looks tired. When she sees Lan Zhan she takes a deep breath and rubs her fingertips over her brow.

“What do you want *now?”* she asks. “It hasn’t even been twelve hours since I’ve had to see your face. What could possibly have gone wrong by now?”

He sets the gift bag on her desk, the tips of both hands touching the edge of the bag. “I hope A-Yuan is feeling better,” he says.

She stares at the gift bag from between her fingertips. “A-Yuan has too many toys already,” she says after a moment.

“It’s a set of pencils and an art pad,” he tells her.

“He also has plenty of art supplies,” she says, her eyes flickering up to meet his.

“Of course,” he agrees. “These are watercolor pencils, though. There’s no mess involved. He can draw whatever he likes, and then use a small amount of water to paint with his fingers. It doesn’t stain and it’s non-toxic. They’re the same brand that I use.”

She snorts. “Then they’re *definitely* too expensive for a child.”

“Not at all,” he says. “The cost is hardly worth mentioning. I only wanted to say that they’re good quality.”

Her mouth twists. He’s not sure if it’s because she wants to laugh. He pushes the bag across the desk, and she accepts it with both hands. “Thank you,” she says. “He’ll like it. You left a pretty big impression on him.”

“He made a drawing for me,” Lan Zhan says.

“He does that,” she agrees. She gestures around her office, at Wei Yuan’s presence throughout: the lump of clay on her desk, but also more drawings, and a photo of Wei Yuan as a baby, being held by someone who could only be his mother. Her face is out of frame, but her skin is gray and picked with dark scabs, her hands loose around the red-faced infant balanced on her knees. “You can probably expect more drawings, you know,” Wen Qing says. “He’s a generous kid. He’d give away pretty much anything he has. He takes after his dad like that.”

Her eyes are sharp. Her fingernails are very still on the glass surface of her desk, bright enough that the red reflects back up towards the light. Lan Zhan nods. “Thank you for telling me,” he says, and goes back to work.

-

Lan Zhan does, in fact, receive another drawing. Two days later, when Wei Ying returns for Spring fittings, the first thing he does when he arrives is to drop his backpack onto one of the metal stools, rummage through it, and pull out another piece of white paper. It's thicker than what the first drawing had been made on; it's from the pad that Lan Zhan bought. The watercolor pencils are smeared so thickly that color saturates the entire page, as dark as if Wei Yuan had used gouache instead. They're moody colors: mostly red, some mottled browns, sickly, swirling orange. A cracked, wavering line of pale blue weaves through everything, unobliterated by tiny fingers, like a glimpse of the sky through storm clouds. Lan Zhan loves it.

"You have made a conquest of my child," Wei Ying says gravely. "I have raised a tiny materialist. He's obsessed with the pencils and maybe also with you. I think he's worn through about half of the red one already."

"Would he like more?" Lan Zhan asks, still studying the painting.

"No," Wei Ying says, rolling his eyes. "He'd like you to come to Queens and buy him ice cream again. What a brat! Kids have no shame. I grovel before you on his behalf."

"Okay," Lan Zhan says happily.

Over in her corner, Miriam's head has gone up. "Shawn, you have a kid?" she demands. "How old is he?"

Wei Ying laughs, looking a little caught out. "He's four," he says. He turns towards Miriam, but not enough to shut Lan Zhan out. It's more like he's angled his shoulder against Lan Zhan's, like they're standing as a unit. It's been like that, this past week. Since they had lunch at Birreria, Wei Ying has stood closer and closer, the distance

between them softening.

Miriam grins. “I’ll trade you cat photos for baby photos,” she says.

“I like cats,” Wei Ying says, shrugging.

Miriam comes to stand with them, and they all bend their heads over Wei Ying’s cracked, out-of-date phone screen. Miriam coos appropriately. Lan Zhan shows her the painting, and she agrees dutifully that it is wonderfully Expressionistic. A few of Wei Ying’s photos have Wen Qing in them, holding Wei Yuan in her lap, or walking through Central Park with matching frowns and matching bucket hats, holding hands. Miriam says things like, “He’s so cute!” which is indisputable, and “He looks like a good kid,” which seems true as far as Lan Zhan’s admittedly limited experience, and “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Wen Qing smile before, it’s a miracle.”

“He’s one of the only people I’ve ever met who can do it,” Wei Ying says. He smiles as he says it, the way he smiles when he says just about anything, but his tone is warm. Proud. “I don’t know where he gets that big heart of his, but it’s -” He makes a dramatic sort of sound and squeezes his hands together in front of his own heart, like he’s wringing a towel. “Ah! It’s crazy.”

Wei Ying loves his son so much. It’s written all over his face. Lan Zhan studies it, drinks it in.

Miriam’s eyes flick up to Lan Zhan’s, who feels a cold trickle of dread on the back of his neck. “Show him the picture,” she says.

“No,” Lan Zhan says instantly.

“What picture?” Wei Ying asks, at the same time that Miriam groans playfully.

“It’s *so* cute,” Miriam says to Wei Ying, laughing. “Stephen showed it to me last year and I almost died laughing. Come on, boss! It’s so cute. Let him see it.”

Lan Zhan sighs deeply. “No,” he says again.

Wei Ying grins sideways, conspiring. “Why, what’s it a picture of? Is

it you, Lan Zhan? Is it a baby photo of you?"

"No," Lan Zhan lies, and then, suffering greatly, pulls his phone out of his pocket. All of the photos in his phone are categorized, so it's easy to pull up the folder marked FAMILY and, screaming inside his heart, hand the phone to Wei Ying so that he and Miriam can laugh.

Miriam does laugh - instantly and heartily, even though she's seen the photo before. It's an unremarkable photo, to Lan Zhan. It's just him and his brother, sitting on a blanket, presumably in a park. The neatly packed remains of a picnic lunch are next to them, and Lan Zhan is sprawled ungainly in his brother's lap, oozing over the sides of Lan Huan's furiously cheerful grip. "Lan Zhan," Wei Ying breathes. "Lan Zhan, is this really you? This is the fattest, angriest baby I have ever seen in my life. Your neck rolls have rolls. You look like the Michelin tire man. What a little emperor! What are you so *mad* for?"

As if Lan Zhan would know. He barely remembers anything from before he was six anyway. He sniffs and goes to pin the painting next to the first gift he'd received, trying to salvage some dignity. "Let me know when you're ready to begin," he says, taking refuge behind his desk. Wei Ying and Miriam both laugh at him.

"Okay, let's stop bullying your boss," Wei Ying says, patting Miriam on the shoulder. "I'll come bug you for cat pictures later."

Before she heads back to the drafting table, Miriam looks Lan Zhan dead in the eye and mouths, *show him the other one*. Lan Zhan rolls his eyes and waits for death.

Wei Ying crosses the studio, stands on the other side of the desk with his hands resting gently on his hips, arms akimbo. He's smiling, but there's something complex about it. Something a little nervous, which makes Lan Zhan nervous as well. "Are you ready to start?" he says, and thinks very hard about coming out behind his desk, and does not.

"Yeah," Wei Ying says, but like Lan Zhan, doesn't move. He looks at the wall, at the two pictures hanging side by side, next to one of Lan Zhan's croquis. "You know you don't have to actually keep

them, right? He's not gonna come here and see that they're not hanging up on the fridge or whatever and get all upset. Kids will absolutely bury you in kid art if you let them."

Lan Zhan looks away. He touches his computer mouse just for something to do, something that's not Wei Ying's probing smiling. "I like them," he says, a little mulish. Being buried in art sounds really nice. He did the same thing when he was little, he's told - played endlessly with their mother's pencils and inks. He probably got accused of wasting the materials, and his drawings were probably thrown away. Besides, they look nice up on the wall. There's even a bit of glitter clinging to the bottom of the watercolor painting, cross-contamination from another art project. Lan Zhan likes glitter. When he looks back up, Wei Ying is watching him closely. "Would you like to start?" he asks, before Wei Ying can say anything else.

"Hmm," Wei Ying says. "Yeah, I think I'm ready."

But he still doesn't move. Instead he says, a playful tone squeezed back into his voice, "So were you an angry kid? You're so sweet now, it's hard to picture it. How old were you when you lost all that baby fat?"

That's a lot of questions, all in a row. "I don't know," Lan Zhan hedges, an answer to all of them. Does Wei Ying think he's sweet? That doesn't seem right.

"I was a little chunkster until I was fourteen," Wei Ying says, laughing. "Grew a foot and a half in like a month, thought I was actually dying. Who knew that growing pains were real and not a metaphor?"

Lan Zhan tries to picture it: Wei Ying, small and chubby. It's unfathomably cute, but he still doesn't want to come out from behind the desk. On the other side of the studio, Miriam is tapping away at her keyboard. When Lan Zhan looks over she catches his eye and winks. He can't tell if that means they're being very obvious or if she's still riding the high of embarrassing her boss. Her headphones are on, but there's no sound coming from them; she may still be able to hear them talking. Despairingly, he takes the

risk anyway. “I was very quiet,” he says. “I learned to speak late. And then for many years I would only speak to my brother.”

Wei Ying tilts his head. “Huh,” he says. He shifts from foot to foot and then, decisively, to one side - blocking Lan Zhan from Miriam’s line of sight. “How late is late?”

Lan Zhan shakes his head. “I don’t know. My uncle’s never said. I don’t remember it.”

“Do you remember not talking?”

Lan Zhan shakes his head again. “I don’t remember anything from before our - ” He stops talking. He swallows around the words, his throat jumping. He looks away from Wei Ying. His face is burning. He looks at his email, reflexively. There’s something from Wen Qing, the email title in all caps: *SPEC DOC DEVIATIONS - FIX ASAP*. His hands itch to click on it but he holds still, waiting to see what Wei Ying says.

Wei Ying says nothing. He looks Lan Zhan up and down and then after a moment turns away, relaxing his posture. He goes over to the wall, where the sketches from Spring are still up, in a place of pride. Lan Zhan is working on Summer already, but he hasn’t hit his stride quite yet. Wei Ying is still angled towards him, just barely - his chin tipped down but his ear turned towards Lan Zhan. Almost reflexively, he starts unbuttoning his shirt. Lan Zhan relaxes by degrees, watching that familiar skin appear. He comes out from behind the desk. Waits as Wei Ying shimmies out of his shorts. Takes both shirt and shorts from him and folds them neatly, sets them onto one of the stools.

“Are *you* ready?” Wei Ying asks, so gently that it feels a little out of place, or maybe just surprising.

Lan Zhan makes a soft sound, a far cry from the *yes* he wants to make, frustrated. What would it feel like, to say these things out loud? What would it be like to have them heard? He wants to have them heard. His throat clicks.

“Sorry for, you know, getting too personal,” Wei Ying says after a

moment. He laughs again, ruffling a hand over his hair. His skin rolls over his ribs. He looks tanner than normal, like he'd been out in the sun. His nipples are uneven brown circles that Lan Zhan wants very badly to touch. Distracting enough that Lan Zhan almost doesn't hear Wei Ying add, still softly laughing, "I just want to know about you."

Lan Zhan looks up.

After a moment, Wei Ying looks back. "Hey, um," he says. "Do you uh. Do you want to go out sometime? With me? It doesn't have to be in Queens buying ice cream for my kid. I'm, you know. I'm down for whatever."

Lan Zhan inhales. It feels endless. His heart is hammering wildly in his chest. After a moment he finds his voice. "As friends?" he asks, afraid to hope.

Wei Ying bites his lip. He stares at Lan Zhan intently, reading who knows what from his face. He shakes his head: no. Not just as friends. Lan Zhan is afraid to look away, to see if Miriam is listening in, how exposed they are. He feels, a little absurdly, that if he looks away the moment will break, and Wei Ying will change his mind. But - "You said you didn't want to date me," Lan Zhan says, because he needs to say it. He needs to know where the boundaries are.

Wei Ying looks at him, looks away, looks back. It's not indecision on his face - Lan Zhan doesn't know what it is. He's reached the limitations of his understanding and is unmoored, uncertain. "I said I wasn't sure if I was ready to date," Wei Ying says. "I also said you were a total catch, ten out of ten, and only crazy people wouldn't want to date you."

"Semantics," Lan Zhan says, ignoring all of that. Wei Ying laughs. There's a whole language in the way he laughs, and it makes Lan Zhan dizzy. Is this hope? Is that what he's feeling? He thinks it might break him into pieces.

"Lan Zhan," he chides, and turns infinitesimally closer, sighs. "Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan. I'm not crazy, right? This," and he gestures between them, "I'm not making this up."

Oh, this is a disaster. “You’re not making it up,” Lan Zhan breathes. His hands squeeze around nothing, around air, wanting so many things.

“I just,” Wei Ying says, intense and quiet, “I think I’d really regret it if I didn’t see where this could go, you know? So. Lan Zhan. Do you want to find out with me?”

There’s only one answer he can make to that, and when he says it Wei Ying smiles, slow and bright and beautiful, carrying all his hope right where anyone can get at it.

They do get to work, after. For hours Lan Zhan feels light, untouchable, floating, dazed. They catch each other’s eyes and Wei Ying laughs, every time, and when Lan Zhan’s face starts to ache he realizes that he’s never quite stopped smiling, the whole time. The garments that they work on together look beautiful, even as muslin mockups. The potential makes him want to sing.

He does catch Miriam watching them, just once, something a little strange in her expression - but when she notices him looking she grins and gives him a thumbs up. Shyly, he returns it. He forgets all about Wen Qing’s email. Wei Ying leaves them at 4, as always, and they pass the rest of the afternoon in silence, broken only by the intermittent buzz of Lan Zhan’s cell phone:

Wen Qing says she’ll watch the baby so we’re a go for Saturday!

What time is good for you?

Haha no I’ll come to the city, you came all that way last time

That sounds good

Oh sure

Yes :):):)

Can’t wait!

-

The next morning Lan Zhan misses work, and goes back to urgent care when he can't make the bleeding on his back and shoulders stop. It's a different nurse this time, and he doesn't ask if Lan Zhan is okay, or make any offers to help if he's not.

Chapter 13

Chapter Text

“You are not serious,” Lan Zhan says.

Paul spreads his hands across the wide expanse of his desk. It’s not glass, like most people at Interwoven have. It’s wood, dark and heavy. There’s very little on it: his monitor, a laptop, a small stack of neat papers weighed down by some kind of crystal globe. The meeting request had come as an email, an informal, *can you stop by in a few minutes?* sort of request. He’d been surprised to see Lan Huan there as well. Lan Huan had been surprised to see him.

He’s sitting there now, silent and stiff. He hasn’t said anything.

“You are not serious,” Lan Zhan says again. “That would be twenty five percent of our business. Gone.”

“ORCHiD is way over budget, John,” Paul says. “You guys haven’t hit any of your sales numbers, your profit margin actually managed to go *down* this year, and this overstock situation is getting serious. We’re trying to find a way to salvage what we can.” He gestures at his computer. It’s covered by a privacy film and tells Lan Zhan nothing. “Summer has historically been your worst season. Half of the inventory you guys have right now is from last year’s Summer collection, right? This is what we’ve come up with to fix your fiscal year.”

Lan Zhan looks at his brother. Lan Huan looks at him, and there, in the red corners of his eyes, Lan Zhan finally sees the truth. The only thing that Lan Huan is surprised about is that Lan Zhan is here to hear this. Why? Why did Paul bring him in? “We were made to over-order, last Summer,” Lan Zhan says. It’s true. His hand goes to his phone, to show Paul the emails, the back and forth that had gone on for weeks between Lan Huan and Wen Qing, laying out the bare numbers of confirmed revenue against the planned buy. But Paul had seen them. Had approved the numbers. Lan Huan had

added Paul back into cc three times into the email thread, whenever Wen Qing took him off.

Paul shrugs. “Happens to the best of us,” he says.

“We can’t cancel an entire collection,” Lan Zhan says. Why isn’t Lan Huan saying this? Why is he making Lan Zhan speak? “We will lose production space, we will lose retail - we’re on thirty day terms to JLT, we will fall behind in payments if we don’t have cash incoming. This is not a good solution.”

Paul leans back in his seat. His desk is parallel to his window, slanting light over the densely carpeted floor. His office faces to the west: a very different view of the same city than the one from Lan Zhan’s studio. “Well,” he says, conciliatory. “There’s a few options here. We can also see about unloading some of the excess inventory to some of our off-price customers. It’d be at heavy discount but -”

“No,” Lan Zhan says immediately.

Slower, much slower, Lan Huan shakes his head. “Off-price retailers damage the reputation of the brand,” he says. “ORCHiD has never offered discounts. We go along with retailer sales when we have to, but you know that’s not part of our business model.”

Paul smiles. It’s an unnerving smile, a small one. He nods, like he was expecting that. He says, as smoothly as if they hadn’t interrupted him at all, “What about licensing your print catalog to some of the other divisions, then? Interwoven would pay you a fair rate for them. We can work out a credit extension as part of the licensing package. Everyone’s happy.”

Lan Zhan breathes in, and then finds he can’t breathe out. He looks at his brother. Say something. *Say something.* Lan Huan looks thoughtful. Like he’s considering it.

“Gege,” Lan Zhan says, and closes his mouth so fast that his teeth click together painfully. His neck itches. The back of his head itches. He’s hungry. It’s past lunchtime and he’s hungry in a way that makes him feel a little sick with it. The feeling is so banal - as banal as Paul’s expression across the wide wood desk, the dense

carpet, the smell of offices and stale coffee, the sterility of air conditioning. The cold, awful fear in him is also banal.

After a moment, when Lan Zhan's world collapses and reforms and collapses again, Lan Huan says, carefully, "We would prefer to look at other options, Paul. My brother's prints are ORCHiD's intellectual property. We left the print catalog as a carveout for a reason."

Paul frowns. He steeples his fingers on his desk. Smudges of pale condensation appear along the wood and disappear. "I suggest you go back and look at your contract, Stephen," he says, and that cold fear slides out of Lan Zhan's chest and settles into his guts. Lan Huan straightens in his seat. His expression gives Lan Zhan nothing.

Paul continues, relentless and bland, "The print catalog is why we bought you! Prestige and prints - exactly what Interwoven was looking for, to expand our portfolio. We really saw so much potential there, right from the beginning. Those patterns could go on tee shirts, tote bags - anything! They're eye-catching. Different. *Exotic.* If it's brand diffusion you're worried about, we can make a sister brand to carry it for you. O by ORCHiD or something like that. Completely different retail channels, completely different customers. This isn't some existential threat to your brand, guys. It's business."

"No!" Lan Zhan says again. Paul smiles at him, indulgent.

Lan Huan raises a hand before either of them can say anything else. Lan Zhan stills immediately, sinking back into his seat.

"Paul," Lan Huan says, and smiles back at him. "What about a capsule collection? Fewer SKUs, less risk for the inventory, but we keep up our momentum. We can partner with Sartoric's jewelry team and make a story of it. In the meantime, I'll go back to the boutique list and offer a *small* discount -" Lan Zhan grips the arms of his chair, "- to see if we can get some of the old stock moving."

Paul meets Lan Huan's eyes and says nothing for a long time. The air conditioner clicks on. The soft sound of voices comes through the glass front of his office, as people start coming back from lunch. "Send me a proposal," he says finally.

The air between them crackles as they leave Paul's office. They walk back to Lan Huan's office without discussing it. Lan Zhan follows his brother in. He would have slammed the door if he could, if it didn't live on pneumatic, oiled hinges. "What did he mean, look at your contract?" he demands.

Lan Huan rakes his hands over his face. The motion is unexpectedly violent, and enough to check Lan Zhan's fury. "You have a copy of the contract," Lan Huan says. His fingernails leave red marks on his cheeks that are slow to fade. "Why don't you look at it and find out?"

Lan Zhan's heart beats hard in his chest, dizzying. He turns away - not far, just far enough that he doesn't have to look his brother in the face. He looks at the weave of the carpet underneath their feet, featureless and gray. He looks at the photos on Lan Huan's wall: his graduation, their mother's croquis. In the photo, they look so happy. Lan Huan is smiling so hard his cheeks are puffed with it, his arm around Lan Zhan's shoulders, his fingers gripped tight in Lan Zhan's shirt.

Lan Zhan steps forward and takes his brother's hand. He's shaking. They're both shaking. He's not holding Lan Huan's hand so much as gripping his wrist, his fingertips pressed against the soft meat under Lan Huan's thumb. Lan Huan stares at him, his eyes rimmed in red. Lan Zhan takes a breath. Can't find the words. Takes another. Tries again. Says, "A capsule collection is a good idea."

"A-Zhan," Lan Huan says. His voice is hoarse. He won't look at Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan shakes his head. "I'll put together a full collection. The usual number of looks," he says. "When Spring does well and we have more cash on hand, we'll have a full collection for Summer ready to go. We can keep going."

"A-Zhan," Lan Huan says again. Lan Zhan takes his other hand, lacing their fingers together. Their hands are the same size, the same shape except for the first two fingers of Lan Huan's left hand, which were broken and healed poorly. It's one of Lan Zhan's earliest memories: the bright glare of a hospital, watching dully as the

doctor rebroke Lan Huan's fingers and splinted them properly. They'd given Lan Huan medicine for the pain but he'd still cried, soundlessly, keeping his whole body very still, and then Lan Zhan had fought his way out of the officer's lap and into Lan Huan's, and the doctor had had to finish that way.

"Gege," Lan Zhan says, "don't you trust me?"

Lan Huan laughs, a damp sort of sound. "It's not about trust," he says. His hands are limp between them. "A-Zhan, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Lan Zhan shakes his head again. "I'll come in on the weekends to get it done," he promises. "Send Paul whatever proposal you want, and when Spring does well we can fight for Summer. They don't get to take anything else from us, gege. I won't let them."

"A-Zhan," Lan Huan says, "we won't have a choice."

"I won't let them," Lan Zhan repeats. Slowly. Carefully. It's hard to look his brother in the eye but he does it, to make sure that he's being heard. Lan Huan, who was looking at him already, exhales harshly. Lan Zhan nods, and after a moment Lan Huan nods back.

"Okay," Lan Huan says. "Okay. We'll fight."

Lan Zhan lets go of his hands, and Lan Huan staggers away, behind his desk, dropping gracelessly into his chair. He reaches for his phone and pulls up WeChat seemingly by muscle memory, staring blankly at the screen. "Will you close the door on your way out?" he asks.

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Lan Zhan, for once, is late.

It's a quick walk from his apartment to get to the A/C at Chambers Street. He'd woken up early, left early, intending to arrive early, and gotten distracted by a flower vendor at the edge of the park at City Hall. He dithered over roses and tulips and sunflowers and one perfect, purple dahlia, before deciding that flowers would be overeager; that this was a first date; that Wei Ying had promised nothing about a second, nor would Lan Zhan expect him to. They were *seeing where this went.* Maybe flowers could come later.

Then, of course, the train was delayed. And skipping Chambers Street. He has to walk to Canal Street, and then the A that he picks up there goes local, then stops underground for twelve excruciating minutes. It's unbearable: the plan was to meet at the top part of the Highline and walk down, which means he's essentially taking the same twenty minute commute that he does to work, which is only *six stops*, and there being no service in this part of the tunnel means he can't text Wei Ying that he might be late, even though he'd left early enough that he might just be on time instead.

But no, he is late.

He takes the subway steps two at a time, trying not to breathe the hateful air of Penn Station too deeply. The few blocks to 30th Street and 10th Avenue are hysterically unromantic: the crowd of tourists and panhandlers fade away as soon as you leave 8th Ave but only to yield to stinking construction sites, blocked off sidewalks, hot asphalt, and the looming, day-glo presence of steam vents. The best way to see the Highline is to do exactly as they are, for this exact reason: to avoid ending a date in the yawning hellscape of Midtown.

There, finally: the tourists reappear. There: the steel staircase leading up to what had been an abandoned freight line skirting the western edge of Manhattan before it was turned into a long, elevated park. There: Wei Ying, lounging against a railing, staring contemplatively at a strand of grass.

He turns, and instantly Lan Zhan is breathless. "I'm sorry I'm late," he says. Such a small statement in the face of everything else he's

feeling.

Wei Ying laughs at him. He's barely seen Wei Ying like this - outdoors, in the sunlight. No, that's not true - they'd walked around Flushing and they'd walked to the photographers studio but it wasn't like this: it wasn't like this. Wei Ying is wearing a pair of drop crotch pants that might be Rick Owen, and a complicated looking patchwork shirt that's maybe Westwood again - maybe he'd modeled for them, Lan Zhan can't remember - and he looks amazing, he looks like he was made to walk in the sun.

Oh, Lan Zhan is so overwhelmed. He wipes his palms on his trousers, surreptitiously. They're Miharayasuhiro, Spring 2017, and he'd chosen them because he'd wanted to feel careless, light, relaxed. It has not worked at all.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying is grinning with all his teeth. His hands are loose at his sides, palms facing out. The crowd eddies around them, unimportant. Up on the elevated platform the air is thinner, sweeter. The stink of asphalt is gone. Nothing else matters. "Lan Zhan, it's fine! You're only like five minutes late. For New York that's practically early."

"Regardless," Lan Zhan says doggedly. Oh, he doesn't even have anything to show for it, any coffee or pastry or the flowers that would definitely have been too much.

Wei Ying tilts his head. "Walk with me," he says very seriously, and then giggles - so they do.

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The Highline is an unusual park. It's a span of thirty blocks or so that weave in between the dense buildings of the west side of

Manhattan, sandwiched between weathered brick and gleaming steel towers: an elevated, groomed stretch of greenery and sweet-smelling tall grass. Tucked in among the grass are sculptures, benches, little platforms to sit on, vendors selling all sorts of expensive treats. Lan Zhan buys them both popsicles, strangely flavored. He buys them Blue Bottle iced coffee, dark and bitter, to wash away the sticky sweetness. It's a warm day and the way is stuffed with tourists leaning over railings to take selfies, huge clumps of people not looking at where they're going. But they manage regardless to find a place to sit, quiet and out of the way, tucked into the high grass. It's just a little walkway a few steps down below the main stretch, a bench, and a glass panel replacing the dark railings, giving them an uninterrupted view of the street below.

Wei Ying sets his coffee on the bench beside him and attacks his popsicle. Lan Zhan watches him lick away at it, feeling more at peace than he has for a while. His own popsicle drips a lurid red onto the back of his hand. The air smells densely green, and the crowd feels far away. He'd like to lick the popsicle flavor out of Wei Ying's mouth. Or drizzle plum syrup from his popsicle onto his cock and make Wei Ying lick it off. He's really getting ahead of himself here.

"You seem a little stressed," Wei Ying says.

Lan Zhan, caught with his tongue out to lick syrup off the back of his hand, swallows awkwardly. "I apologize," he says.

Wei Ying laughs. He leans back a little, and braces one hand along the bench. It's not quite a move: his forearm brushes against Lan Zhan's lower back. The heel of his hand is a careful distance away from Lan Zhan's hip. Maybe Lan Zhan should move a little closer. Maybe he should stay perfectly still and wait to see if Wei Ying will, like a wild animal or a butterfly, creep any closer. "It's not an insult," Wei Ying says. "Just an observation. I'm asking how you are, Lan Zhan."

Lan Zhan bites into his popsicle. Wei Ying makes a strangled sort of sound but doesn't comment. Lan Zhan crunches the ice between his teeth and thinks, and then decides. "I am stressed," he admits. He

scratches the back of his neck absently. “Work has been very difficult lately. Our Resort sales samples came in this past week and they’re,” he closes his eyes, “*terrible.* Half the measurements are out of tolerance. They’ve used a lining that was *not* approved. Do you remember the lace jacket?”

“Of course,” Wei Ying answers.

Lan Zhan takes a deep breath, and takes refuge in the hope that Wei Ying will understand the deep outrage of what is happening. He says all in a rush, “They cut the fabric *directly across the pattern*, and didn’t even attempt to match it up across the seams.” He has to stop, breathing hard.

“No!” Wei Ying says. He looks as angry as Lan Zhan feels. “Why the hell would they do that? That’s so stupid, do they think you’re making clothes for Forever 21?” He exhales harshly through his nose, scattering the loose hair around his face.

“They are sending new samples,” Lan Zhan says. “But I am extremely concerned about production. I will try and get the style subcontracted to my family’s factory, but … it’s very important that this collection does well. My brother had to push back two important meetings since we didn’t have physical samples to show.”

“What about the lookbook we did?” Wei Ying asks, and Lan Zhan glows: the lookbook *we* did. They had done it together.

“It’s been sent,” Lan Zhan says.

“But it’s better when they can see the stuff in person,” Wei Ying says. Lan Zhan nods. “And in the week or two before the other samples come in the buyers will have other meetings, they’ll book other merch, they’ll run out of budget before committing to you guys … blegh.”

Lan Zhan breathes out. “Yes,” he says. That was it exactly. They sit in silence for a moment, contemplating a nearly inevitable chain of events. That was the thing about fashion, maybe the most important thing: the momentum you need, to run a business. Each meeting - each collection, each show, each year - depended on the one before

it. He's started working on Summer, because their merchandising calendar says that he should, but so far the collection feels aimless, confused. It lacks the clarity of Spring, the rightness of it. Each sketch feels as gray and featureless as the last few days, weeks, maybe *years* have been.

He washes the sweet taste of the popsicle out of his mouth with a sip of coffee. Wei Ying's eyes move faintly back and forth, watching the cars roll by under their feet. His hand is still so, so close to Lan Zhan's hip. So close to being wrapped around his waist. "I'm sorry," Lan Zhan offers.

Wei Ying's gaze flicks towards him. "For what?"

"For talking about work," Lan Zhan says. "It's not very -" Date-like? Sexy? Appealing? Who starts a date off by complaining.

"I asked how you are," Wei Ying says, like it's an explanation. "I mean, I could chat your ear off for another few hours about the adventures of socializing the wild animal that lives in my house, but I'd also like to get to know you a little better, you know?"

Lan Zhan itches the back of his neck. "You would?" he asks, very softly. He doesn't know why he's so surprised.

Wei Ying's eyes widen. He bites his lip. He looks away. "Um," he says. "I mean. Yeah. I would. I want to know everything about you. That sounds crazy, I mean - I *feel* crazy. But I do." He adds, a little self-consciously, "If that's uh, if that's okay." And then - miraculously - lifts his hand and strokes the back of it down Lan Zhan's spine, from between his shoulder blades all the way down to the dip of his lower back. Then he returns his hand demurely back to the bench, leaving Lan Zhan tense and twitching. They sit for a long moment, letting the silence sink in between them.

"Work is," Wei Ying says, and sighs - like he's totally unaware of the ruin he's just left in his wake. "Look, tell me if I'm overstepping but - I feel like it's gotta be hard, to come here in service of some big dream and instead you just … work. Forever."

"Here," Lan Zhan echoes. "Do you mean New York? Or America in

general?"

"New York," Wei Ying says. He shrugs, laughs. "I think in other places it's probably easier to have a uh, you know, a balance. Work and the rest of your life, everything else. Maybe it's this industry too that makes it so hard, who knows. Fashion sucks."

"You don't like to work?" Lan Zhan asks. He shifts a little in his seat - just a little, the smallest bit closer, chasing the feeling of Wei Ying's fingertips on his back. Somewhere close by, someone shouts. The boards underneath them shake very faintly with hundreds of feet passing by, out of sight.

Wei Ying laughs, very loudly. "Who *likes* to work?" he asks.

Lan Zhan frowns at him. "I like to work," he says, more primly than he feels. He can guess at what Wei Ying is driving at. He doesn't feel like he's being made fun of, the way people do sometimes, when you care about a thing.

"You like the *results,*" Wei Ying says. He finishes his popsicle and sets the stick down next to him on the bench, where it leaves visible sticky traces. "But you can't tell me you like going into that office every day with all those condescending, racist assholes."

Lan Zhan sighs deeply. He tips his head back and examines the sky. "What about you?" he challenges, rather than address that.

"I like working with *you,*" Wei Ying says, terribly flirtatious. Lan Zhan doesn't quite resist the urge to roll his eyes, even though he likes it. Wei Ying bumps his shoulder into Lan Zhan's to acknowledge it, and then continues in his normal tone, "No but it's - I mean, I grew up here. To me it's just a city, you know? It's home. I don't have the same experience that transplants do." He laughs. "I'm not fulfilling any big dream where I left my hometown to do something amazing, right? That's so much pressure."

"I think that's a very American way to look at it," Lan Zhan says wryly.

Wei Ying laughs at him, bumps their shoulders together again. This

time he stays, and the warmth of his body soaks into the ball of Lan Zhan's shoulder, his arm. It makes him hungry. "I guess so," he acknowledges. "The *most* American thing, maybe. An immigrant and their big dreams."

Lan Zhan hums softly. "I am not American, though," he says. He reaches across Wei Ying, picks up the sticky popsicle stick and wraps it into the same napkin he put his own into. His chest brushes against Wei Ying's shoulder. Not quite as daring as stroking a hand down Wei Ying's back, but when he pulls away Wei Ying is blushing. For a second they look at each other, their noses only a few centimeters apart. It would be so easy to kiss him. So easy to tug Wei Ying into his lap and kiss him fully, deeply. He can almost taste Wei Ying's popsicle on his mouth. He's forgotten what flavor Wei Ying ordered, but it stained his lips a perfect rose pink. So complimentary to his skin tone. It's exactly how Lan Zhan would style him, if Wei Ying ever walked in a show for him.

Wei Ying blinks and says, smiling, "You're starting to grow roots, aren't you?"

To say that Lan Zhan freezes would make it sound like a metaphor. His hand, already on the back of his neck, itching away unnoticed, clenches so quickly that his fingernails bite into his skin. He can't say anything. The words have caught in his throat like needles. He stares at Wei Ying, wordless, thoughtless, afraid.

Wei Ying laughs. "Sorry!" he says. "Does that not quite translate? What I meant is, hmm - man, sometimes it's really hard not to use metaphors! I meant you're starting to actually *live* here, like it's a real place. The transplant's version of a mid-life crisis. Shit, all I can think of is metaphors. Do you know what I mean?"

The world starts up again, like a movie: slow and jerky for the first few seconds, and then back to normal, as if it had never gone wrong at all. Wei Ying doesn't know. No one knows. Lan Zhan breathes, slow and steady. Wei Ying is watching him closely. "Did I say something weird?" he asks.

"No," Lan Zhan says. He brings his free hand down into his lap and does his best not to break the popsicle sticks with the other. His

neck stings. Did he draw blood? He's afraid to look. "No, I understand what you mean."

"It's not a bad thing," Wei Ying says slowly. It's a little hard to breathe with him sitting so close, the smell of the plants and Wei Ying tangling up his senses. "You've been here - what, four years? This place," he gestures with a big arm, out towards Chelsea and the avenue and all of Manhattan, high and gleaming in the cool air, "it's real to you now. You've been to all the bars and the cool restaurants and you've got your favorite places and you feel like you're starting to, you know, *get it.* I've heard the exact same story from a lot of people, *especially* fashion people. But then what? Is this life? Is this the rest of your life? Is this what it's gonna be? Is it just some shitty job that'll mistreat you and take all your good ideas and not pay you enough? I mean, not *you,* you're clearly paid just fine, but - you know what I mean? Is there more to the dream?"

Lan Zhan shakes his head. There's a lot of words there, but he's getting used to the way that Wei Ying talks around a central idea. "I don't have a choice," he reminds Wei Ying. "I'm here on a work visa. Even if we wanted to divest from ORCHiD - if the absolute worst should happen - my brother and I would have to find another company to sponsor us, in order to stay here. It would be very difficult."

"You could find someone to marry you," Wei Ying says, and laughs - but it's a gentle laugh, a sympathetic one. "If you did want to stay here, that is." His gaze is attentive and free from judgement. It asks Lan Zhan what he wants. It invites an honest answer.

Lan Zhan lifts an eyebrow and says, "It's only our first date, Wei Ying."

Wei Ying laughs louder, harder, and blushes all the way down his throat. It's immensely satisfying to see, and makes Lan Zhan bold enough to offer his hand to Wei Ying. "Shall we keep walking?" he asks.

Wei Ying smiles as he takes Lan Zhan's hand, as he lets Lan Zhan help him to his feet. For a moment they stand there, looking foolishly at each other and smiling. Lan Zhan doesn't notice the

freckles of pink and orange lichen that his fingertips left on the back of Wei Ying's fingers, carried like pollen from the back of his neck, or the faint smear of sap that makes them cling so neatly to Wei Ying's skin.

Hours later, Wei Ying will find the cheerful spots of color left behind, and search the rest of his clothing frantically for pollen, to clean it before it leaves a stain. He'll find nothing.

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They waste the afternoon away, finding tucked away little spaces in the ebb and flow of the Highline to sit and talk and twine closer together. They reach the end of the walk and drift naturally into the Whitney Museum, and spend another two hours or so walking through the galleries, hand in hand. Lan Zhan doesn't know much about American art - art history in general had been a part of his studies, of course, but he'd found the Western focus very frustrating and had done all of his papers on Chinese artists instead. Without context, the Whitney can be confusing - full of large scale art rooted deep in American political history, abstract sculpture that might have started out life as car parts, and gold plated urinals - but the cavernous building is cool inside and it smells good and he is with Wei Ying, and they are on a date!

He is on a date with Wei Ying!

So he loves it. He loves the cafe on the top floor that they have lunch at, overpriced salads and questionable hummus and a dense triple chocolate chip cookie that is so legitimately delicious that Wei Ying nearly cries over it - and all the while the breeze off the East River blows over their shoulders, and the whole world stretches beneath their feet.

Lan Zhan walks him to the train. As Wei Ying turns to jog down the humid stairwell, Lan Zhan tugs him back up by the wrist, into his arms, and kisses him thoroughly, right there for anyone to see. And oh, it is a good kiss. He bends Wei Ying backwards, back against the lamppost that marks the subway entrance, lit up all over in its pale green light. He lets Wei Ying feel the intention behind it, the restraint. Their tongues just barely brush, and Wei Ying laughs at the sensation, like he can't help it. Lan Zhan kisses his smile, and smiles too. How else to describe it? Every nerve lights up inside him, just to be close enough to feel the warmth of Wei Ying's skin.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying says, when he pulls away. He's blushing all over. "Right here in the stairs! People are trying to get by!"

"I don't care," Lan Zhan breathes into his mouth, because he doesn't. People block the subway all the time. Why shouldn't it be them, just this once? But all Wei Ying does is grab Lan Zhan's shirt in both hands, back them up a little further and out of the way, and kiss him: past the point of decency, laughing the whole time.

"Let's uh," he whispers, "let's do this again sometime. Real soon. Okay, Lan Zhan?"

Lan Zhan floats home in a dream. Nothing bothers him. It's summer, and later than the fading sunlight makes it feel, and the streets of Chelsea are clogging with people dressed to go out, to see and be seen. High heeled shoes clip against the cobblestones, as loud as the laughter that echoes up against the tall, worn brick. There are so many people spilled out into the street, smoking cigarettes in between $20 cocktails, waiting endlessly for velvet ropes to allow them access to something, *something.* The streets get quieter as he walks south, but he doesn't really notice: everything in him sings.

He's distracted as he lets himself into his apartment - a dim, happy thrum of arousal had kept him company on the walk, and he's looking forward to jerking off thinking about their date. Maybe if he'd pulled Wei Ying into one of the Whitney's terrible bathrooms, or if they'd found some false privacy on the Highline, tucked away in all that tall grass - and for a moment he doesn't realize that he's not alone. Then Mingjue starts laughing awkwardly, and he and Lan

Huan break apart from each other. Mingjue's shirt is halfway unbuttoned. The top button of Lan Huan's pants is undone. The lights are at half brightness and there's music playing, something soft, with English lyrics.

Lan Zhan's hand is still hovering above the light switch. His eyes are locked with his brother's. "I'm sorry to interrupt," he says after a long moment.

"I thought you wouldn't be home until late," Lan Huan says. Subtly, he passes a hand down his own body and redoes his pants. They're standing near the kitchen - Lan Huan seems to have had Mingjue pinned up against the countertop - and no one moves, either to sit down on the barstools or to shift towards the living room.

"It's fine, it's fine!" Mingjue says, still laughing. He redoes the buttons on his shirt. "Sorry we were uh," he says, and then visibly gives up trying to figure out what to apologize for.

"I'll leave you alone, then," Lan Zhan, and moves to walk past the two of them.

"How was your date?" Mingjue asks, before he can disappear into his room. Both Lan Zhan and Lan Huan look at him. Lan Huan's expression is a mirror of the surprise, the dismay that Lan Zhan can feel on his own face.

"Mingjue," Lan Huan says. It sounds like a warning, and Mingjue doesn't seem to hear it.

"Good," Lan Zhan answers warily.

"A-Zhan," Lan Huan says. Lan Zhan looks at his brother. His brother is looking at Mingjue.

"Okay," Lan Zhan says, and escapes. He shuts his door behind himself in the middle of Mingjue asking, "Did you guys have another fight? I haven't seen him for -"

He stands for a moment in his dark bedroom. It's never truly dark, not really; the city lights it up from below. He undresses with the lights still off, feeling dazed. He can't hear anything from the living

room. He can only assume that they've gone into Lan Huan's bedroom and closed their own door. He crawls naked into bed and rests on top of the sheets for long, thoughtless minutes. It isn't until his eyes adjust that he sees the lichen for himself: spread across his chest and shoulders in a riot of colors, like a stone in cool shade. It's spread all the way down into the tender crook of each elbow, tracing along the path of his veins.

Peeling them off, it turns out, feels exactly like peeling off thick, dense scabs, and reveals the same sort of raw pink skin underneath.

Chapter 14

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

The next batch of samples don't arrive until late morning, hours after Lan Zhan had gotten to the office. He'd come in early, unable to sleep - restless and sore all over. There were flies in his room this morning, and he's not sure if they've followed him to the office. The air feels like it's saturated with some low drone, constant - but it could be the hum of electricity, or the city noise that all New Yorkers must learn to block out, the way they stop seeing the towering, hot piles of garbage on the sidewalk, the puddles of vomit that can only be stepped over, the suffering of others conducted by necessity in public. This morning he feels skinned raw - his heart, by Wei Ying and his brother. His skin, by lichen and the three vines that appeared at the base of his skull this morning, each as thick as a finger. He'd seen four people on his walk that maybe, maybe were the same as him. Not as clear as the woman on the subway with the flower in her hair, but - the shade of moss inside a beard, sleeves that were too long for the weather, a certain look in the eyes.

All morning he'd been distracted, restless. He'd jerked off in the shower that morning but it had been unsatisfying, nowhere near the high he'd been hoping for last night, after his date. By the time he'd gotten all of the lichen off it had been late and he'd been exhausted. He hadn't had the nightmare, but he'd woken up feeling strange. He'd stood in front of the mirror for a long time, holding a towel over the holes in his neck and waiting for the bleeding to stop - staring at all those patches of new skin, rotating his arm to see how the muscles move underneath. He's so tired that the colors swirl behind his eyes; so tired that the body in front of him is only confusing. It doesn't feel like his own. The only sound in the apartment when he'd left had been Mingjue's whistling snores, faint

through Lan Huan’s closed door.

So, work: they’ve already repaired most of the salesman samples they received last week, the ones without egregious disregard for basic sewing skills. Lan Zhan has been diligently checking JLT’s tracking numbers each day for the second batch. They receive only three samples per size and style, but it still adds up to a substantial number of garments when spread across more than twenty looks. The items that have been reviewed and repaired are now living impatiently on a garment rack in Lan Huan’s office. Every day the client meetings in Lan Huan's calendar shift, despite Lan Zhan’s daily and voluminous harassment of Meng Yao to get the samples out sooner. The Resort collection is now, collectively, their highest priority; Lan Zhan has blocked off the next three days for both he and Miriam to review and repair the items that will arrive today. Summer must wait. Spring must wait, even though the merchandising meeting is coming up, to do final line selection. In this, at least, Lan Zhan feels confident. For Spring, he is prepared to fight.

Miriam arrives promptly at nine. Lan Zhan is groggy despite an iced coffee and an awful tea from the Keurig machine in the break room. He doesn’t notice when she slips through the open door. There’s no thump of her headphones to warn him, which on most days are loud enough that he can hear her music even over the whir of the sewing machine. He doesn’t realize she’s there until he lifts his foot from the pedal for a moment, just long enough for her to clear her throat and say, “Hey, boss. Do you have a second?”

Lan Zhan looks up. Miriam’s smile looks like a wince. “Yes?” he says. He gestures to his own chair, and turns to face her fully.

She sits. Hesitates. And then says, all in a rush, “I’m putting in my two weeks.”

Two weeks of what? But - no, he knows the phrase. He’s heard it before. “Oh,” he says. He looks down. His eyes take in the shape of the dress waterfalling into his lap, without really seeing it. It looks frothy, pretty, made of excess fabric from the last Fall collection. Miriam looks like she’s about to cry.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Obviously I want to make sure everything is set up really well for the merchandise meeting, and the spec docs for Spring - I told the new job that I needed two weeks but if you need me to push it back to three I can ask -”

“Miriam,” he says. “It’s fine.”

For a moment they look at each other. She rubs her eyes. He blinks his own, hard. He doesn’t quite know what to say. “Thank you,” he says. “I appreciate everything you’ve done here. If you need a reference, I’d be happy to write one.”

She shakes her head. “I have another job lined up,” she says, which he’d understood already. She said exactly that. Her new job.

“Well,” he says. He looks down again. He needs to tell his brother about this. He needs to think about the logistics, what they’ll do. If they can afford to replace her. If they should bother, with Summer cut to pieces. “If you need one in the future, then.” He backstitches the seam he’d been working on, and carefully pulls the dress free. Trims the long tails of thread. Folds and sets the dress on top of the sewing machine. “I made reservations for the team at Congee Village, the evening after the merchandise meeting,” he says, without looking at her. “It was to celebrate your second anniversary with ORCHiD. We will make it a going away party instead, if you’d like.”

Miriam bursts into tears, which is the opposite of what Lan Zhan wants. They’re not loud, noisy tears - they run out of the corners of her eyes with little fanfare, and are wiped away angrily before they’re halfway down her cheeks. “John, you’re so *nice,*” she says, and that sounds angry too. “You guys deserve so much better than this shitty place.”

Lan Zhan goes to retrieve the tissues from her desk. He sits back down at the sewing machine after, not knowing what else to do with himself. She blows her nose, and they sit silently for a moment, not looking at each other. “Can I ask why?” he says. It feels like a masochistic question, but he wants to know. He’s had other merchandisers - he had assistants at Yunshen, and he went through two assistants and another Product Development Manager

in the first two years at Interwoven, but -

Damn.

Damn.

He really doesn't want her to leave.

Miriam chews on her lip. He watches her do it, waits for her to come out with whatever she clearly doesn't want to say. Finally, she says, "I came to Interwoven as part of an acquisition. I don't know if you remember that, since I didn't, you know, interview with you or anything. It wasn't a great place to work for, but it was my first job out of college. What did I know? Anyway, we were pretty close to going under, and Interwoven came in and saved the day. Sort of. They'd wanted the company because we had a program with Costco, for weather resistant jackets. Kept about half the staff. Not anybody in upper management or Design, just the low wage people, and made us all take a fifteen percent pay cut to keep our jobs. The brand I'd worked for got turned into one of their private label programs. It felt like they just … rolled in and stripped us for parts. I almost quit at that point, you know? But then, you asked me if I wanted to come over to your team." She smiles. Pulls another tissue out of the box and presses it over her eyes. She says, "John, I really, really like working for you. I just don't want to go through all that again."

Lan Zhan breathes. He slips his fingers under his sleeve and presses them hard against the inside of his wrist, onto a patch of tender skin. "I understand," he says, when he can. He stands up and retrieves his bag from the drafting table, and returns with a pack of makeup wipes. Miriam doesn't wear much makeup, but the skin around her eyes is very red, and looks painful. The wipes are moisturizing, and should feel cool against her skin. He presses them into her hand, and when she folds her fingers over his own he lets that happen.

"I'm sorry," she says, and he understands that it's not just for leaving.

-

He thinks about that, later. No - he can't stop thinking about it. He and Miriam pass the day in a silence that's stilted instead of comfortable, until Lan Zhan breaks and texts her a photo of himself and Lan Huan as children, before either of them had hit their growth spurt. She puts her head down on her desk and cries but it's mostly with laughter, and then she comes over and hugs him, which he suffers bravely through. After that, it's better. They joke around a little. They get work done. It's a productive day. But he can't stop thinking about it.

She leaves a little before six. She hesitates for a long moment, as if she's thinking about coming and hugging him again, or maybe saying again that she's sorry. She thinks that ORCHiD will go out of business. She thinks that Interwoven will strip them for parts.

He knows -

He can admit to himself -

That Interwoven is definitely trying to do just that.

After another hour, he pushes away from the sewing machine and stares blankly up at the ceiling for long moments. The building is very quiet. He didn't bother to turn his own music on, after Miriam had left. Lan Huan hasn't come by, even though Lan Zhan emailed him about Miriam's last day. He hadn't been in his office after lunch either. Mingjue's office had been empty as well, but one of his team had volunteered that the boss was out sick, before Lan Zhan could ask. Was Lan Huan with him? Had he not come to the office?

He texts Lan Huan. W*here are you? Did you get my email?*

He goes to the cabinet behind his desk and kneels on the floor. There's still light in the studio, slanted long and gold across the

floor, but behind his desk is full of shadows. The garment rack that lives back there is quite full, and from the ground mostly what he sees is fabric, as thick as trees. It makes the world feel close and safe. It makes everything, even the silent office, feel that much quieter. He doesn't remember where he put all the paperwork, from their first year in New York. Or their last year in Shanghai. It takes him a few tries to find what he's looking for, shifting boxes around in the narrow space, peering at the cryptic writing that Lan Huan had scrawled all over them.

ORCHiD's contract with Interwoven - the terms and conditions of their sale - is a thick document. It had been sent first in English, and translated only on request from their lawyers. Lan Zhan has never even seen the Chinese version, only the English one. Lan Huan had read it. Their uncle had read it. Their lawyer, of course, read through both versions. They'd had a series of meetings to review the most important points, to negotiate for better terms, to demand more and give less. Lan Zhan had attended some of these meetings. Been told he didn't need to worry about others.

So he reads the contract. Carefully, line by line. After the first page, he retrieves his phone and goes through it again, more carefully, with a translation box open on the browser. He has text messages from Wei Ying, which he doesn't look at. There's a text from Mingjue as well. Instead he reads, on his knees - tucked up against the soothing backdrop of tulle, nylon, and silk. He reads as the sun sinks below New Jersey and Manhattan lights up beneath his feet.

After a while he shifts to sit cross legged, pushing himself backwards until he's fully enveloped in the garment rack, until fabric pools over his head and down his shoulders like water. He pulls the tie out of his hair and lets that run down his shoulders as well, cool and soft. He sits like that for a long time, thinking very little. Then he picks up his phone and texts his brother.

I read the contract.

The answer is almost instantaneous: *So you know.*

Lan Zhan lets out a shaky breath. It hurts to have it confirmed. But -

It was his own fault, really. He'd had the paperwork in his possession the whole time. He'd let Uncle and Lan Huan and the lawyer explain the contract to him, but he'd been given his own copy. He could have read it years ago.

Would he have believed, though? Would he have taken it seriously? Or would his eyes have glossed over *in case of breach of contract, all intellectual property will transfer to Interwoven Apparel LLC to fulfill the remaining terms*? Would he have thought: that could never happen to me?

Lan Zhan rubs his thumbs over the phone screen. The metal case creaks in his grip. He taps out, *I want to see our financial records. For the last four years. Everything since we were bought by Interwoven.*

He sets the phone down, hating it, hating the feel of it in his hands. He reaches out and grasps - something, a pant leg, the hem of a dress, instead. He has to focus on the feel of the garment in his hand so that he doesn't tear it to pieces.

At his hip, the phone buzzes. More texts from Lan Huan.

This one says: *I'm sorry.*

It says: *I never meant for this to happen.*

It says his name, twice.

A-Zhan.

A-Zhan, are you there?

-

“Gege, we’re here!”

Lan Zhan hears the scream only seconds before he sees a blur of motion from the corner of his vision. He has barely a moment, probably, before the projectile hits. He moves quickly - and scoops Wei Yuan up neatly in his arms, lifting him high into the air.

He’s rewarded with giggles, and little sticky hands patting surprisingly hard at his face, and then little arms winding around his neck. Lan Zhan is surprised - he’d had the idea of maybe tossing Wei Yuan carefully into the air, he’s heard that children like that, and then setting him back down on the ground - but instead he’s being hugged, and Wei Yuan shows no signs of wanting to be let down. Not knowing what else to do, Lan Zhan keeps holding him.

Wei Ying waves a lazy hand, lagging behind. He’s dressed casually today: a tank top with an outrageously fake Gucci logo on it, and a pair of shorts that look good quality, but aren’t a brand that Lan Zhan recognizes. Lan Zhan is wearing Ann Demeulemeester today, in deference to the weather if not the setting. His shirt is long sleeved, to cover the still-healing marks all over his arms and shoulders. It’s white, and Wei Yuan has already left some kind of purple smudge on the shoulder. When Wei Ying draws near he says, “Oh no, you guys are too cute, let me take a picture,” and then gasps dramatically when he sees the smudge in the photo. He steps close and starts scrubbing inefficiently at the mark.

“It’s fine,” Lan Zhan tells him, though it’s nice to be touched.

“It’s not fine, how much does this *cost?”* Wei Ying looks like he’s about half a second from licking his thumb and going at the stain that way. “Lan Zhan, what are you doing wearing white? Didn’t you know you were going to be outdoors, hanging out with a gremlin today?”

“And his son,” Lan Zhan says. Wei Ying looks up at him, frowning. Lan Zhan elaborates, “A gremlin and his son.”

Wei Yuan bursts into more giggles. “Hah hah,” Wei Ying says, but he’s smiling.

“You look nice,” Lan Zhan tells him, because he does.

“You look tired,” Wei Ying says, very softly. They’re in the middle of a crowd, and they’re in Queens, not Manhattan, and Wei Yuan has tucked his face into Lan Zhan’s neck and is playing happily with his braid. So all Wei Ying does is let his hand turn heavy on Lan Zhan’s shoulder, and squeeze his bicep once, and then he lets go.

“I am tired,” Lan Zhan admits. It’s early still - the opening ceremony won’t start for a little while yet, but already the sun is hot on Lan Zhan’s shoulders, and the air is thick and sweet smelling. He’s never been to Flushing Meadows Park. He hadn’t bothered to look up where it was when Wei Ying had texted him: *Hey idk if this is an uncool second date but there’s a big thing for dragon boat this weekend and I was gonna take my kid, you wanna come with us?*

He’d just said yes.

Wei Yuan wiggles out of Lan Zhan’s arms and sets off running. “Stay close!” Wei Ying yells after him, but it’s half-hearted: the crowd is still pretty thin, and Wei Yuan is dressed from head to toe in neon. His shirt is fluorescent pink; his shorts are an eye-searing yellow; his sneakers are a toxic green. His hat is a combo of several different colors, none of which quite match the rest of his clothing.

He is, undeniably, very easy to spot, and anyway he only goes as far as the edge of Meadow Lake, squatting down by the crumbly edge of it to peer into the water. *“I see a turtle!”* Wei Yuan screams at them over his shoulder.

“Not sleeping well?” Wei Ying asks. His shoulder bumps against Lan Zhan’s as they walk.

“No,” Lan Zhan says, and sighs.

Wei Ying’s expression is sympathetic. “More work stuff?” he asks.

Lan Zhan’s throat tightens. He looks away, letting his eyes follow Wei Yuan’s slow, brightly-colored progress around the rim of the water. Theoretically he could say, *I made my brother show me ORCHiD’s financial records.* He could say, *my brother lied to me, for*

years. He could say, *it's really serious. We're in real danger of losing everything we've worked for. Our whole lives here.*

But he doesn't -

He doesn't want to.

It's exhausting just to think of saying these things, of opening his mouth and letting it all vomit out of him.

It's too much to put on Wei Ying, who is funny and interesting and sexy, and not actually dating Lan Zhan, he doesn't think. He said he wanted to know everything about Lan Zhan, but he never signed up for all of Lan Zhan's troubles. He's only signed up to *see where it goes.* And Lan Zhan, he - he doesn't want to jeopardize that. He wants to see where it goes too. He wants to go as far as he's allowed. That possibility, that hope - well, it's one of the only things he has to look forward to right now. He can admit that to himself.

"I didn't sleep well," he says, which is the truth, and an easier one to admit that he hasn't slept well all week. He hadn't slept well last week either. Maybe not for months. Maybe not since the first morning he pulled a plant out of his back. There had been four this morning, each grown long enough to curl around his torso in the same shape and placement as his ribs, and the bandages under his clothes pull at his skin as they walk.

Wei Ying makes a sympathetic sound, and takes Lan Zhan's hand, and they follow Wei Yuan towards the water, the white tents, the sound of the drums.

-

Lunch, first. Lan Zhan buys dumplings and scallion pancakes and

smashed cucumbers, which are given to them in a little plastic drink cup, mostly submerged in vinegar. Wei Ying had brought a blanket, which they spread on a reasonably grassy patch of ground, after giving up on finding any shade. Lan Zhan pulls sunscreen out of his bag and they share it.

“A-Yuan!” Wei Ying shouts. “Come eat something!”

Wei Yuan, a few dozen yards away and as close to the stage as he can get, ignores his father completely. “He only ate like three french fries this morning,” Wei Ying confides. “I don’t know how babies do it, Lan Zhan. He will literally *run* for five solid hours on nothing but a single grape and somehow he gets taller every week like that? It defies the laws of physics. *A-Yuan! Come here!”*

Wei Yuan finally turns, every part of him slumped in defeat. Lan Zhan feels a pang of sympathy to see it. He trudges back to where they’re sitting, disdaining Wei Ying in favor of sitting next to Lan Zhan and pushing his entire body weight into Lan Zhan’s ribs. He feels as dense as a star, and he doesn’t *want* scallion pancakes. He doesn’t *want* dumplings. “I want a *taco,”* Wei Yuan says.

“I don’t think they have tacos, buddy,” Wei Ying tells him. “Come on, eat a dumpling.”

“No,” Wei Yuan says. “My best friend told me there are tacos.” He looks at the knot of white tents beseechingly, and pulls on Lan Zhan’s sleeve.

“Umm,” Lan Zhan says, uncertainly. He looks at Wei Ying, expecting a cue that they’ll go and look for tacos now. Instead, Wei Ying looks very settled where he is. He even leans forward on his elbows, further grounding his posture. Still, Lan Zhan offers, “I can take him to look for tacos.”

“Who’s your best friend?” Wei Ying demands. He winks at Lan Zhan, but otherwise doesn’t react to Lan Zhan’s offer. “Never mind. Eat a dumpling and you can go back and play with your best friend, who I’m gonna assume is a total stranger you just met over there.” Wei Yuan sighs with his entire body and opens his mouth. Wei Ying puts a dumpling into it, unfazed. Wei Yuan puts both hands onto it

to keep it in his mouth, eats half of it, and then sets the other half down on Lan Zhan's knee. Wei Ying makes a faint wheezing noise.

"Gege, you can have it," Wei Yuan informs Lan Zhan. "I'm not hungry. You're welcome!" And then he runs back to the stage.

"I'm really sorry," Wei Ying says, and hands Lan Zhan a napkin. Lan Zhan moves the partially chewed dumpling into it and peers at the little oily stain underneath.

"It's fine," Lan Zhan says, dabbing at the stain with the napkin. Maybe. The shorts are dry clean only, and he feels a little dubious that the stain will come out. He should have known better, like Wei Ying said earlier. He's thought that so many times lately that the words feel drone-like in his head, as endlessly repetitive as a mantra.

"I think A-Yuan has figured out you're a soft touch," Wei Ying says. He shades his eyes, watching his son make a bee-line for another small child, dancing in front of the stage. The two of them immediately start jumping up and down as fast as they can.

"Is that a bad thing?" Lan Zhan asks softly. He wishes he'd slept better. He wishes he wasn't so itchy under the bandages.

"Hmm," Wei Ying says. "I think that depends." He taps his fingers against his bottom lip, and Lan Zhan's eyes draw helplessly towards it. He assumes that sex will not be happening after their date today, and for once it feels like a relief. He can't imagine how he'd even try to explain his body to anyone right now. Still - he could take Wei Ying's lower lip between his teeth right now. He could pull Wei Ying into his lap and grind their cocks together until they both come in their pants. This is a deeply inappropriate line of thinking. They are in *public,* and Wei Ying's son is *right there,* surrounded by strangers, needing to be watched carefully.

He looks up and meets Wei Ying's eyes, and sees the same heat reflected back at him. Over the dense, soft sound of the crowd around them, he hears Wei Ying's breath grow thick in his lungs.

They look away at the same time. Wei Ying clears his throat and

laughs. “Lan *Zhan,”* he says, faintly complaining. Lan Zhan digs his fingers into his own ribs, trying pathetically not to scratch all his itches.

“How is school?” he asks, before Wei Ying can say anything else.

Wei Ying makes a face, but takes the out that Lan Zhan is offering. “Summer classes are the worst, I regret every choice I’ve ever made in my life,” he says, and Lan Zhan settles in to just listen. The day gets hotter. The crowd rises slowly, like the tide. They collar Wei Yuan long enough to walk to the water’s edge and watch the dragons’ eyes get dotted, and then herd him towards the arts and crafts tents so he can crowd in with the other children and learn how to make tissue paper flowers and Chinese knotting. They stand at the edges of the tent with the other parents, Wei Ying’s attention mostly attuned to Wei Yuan’s multi-colored shape darting restlessly between the tables.

Dimly, the sound of drums echo through the open park. The crowd shifts towards the water, people chatting and resettling. The races have started. “Do you want to -?” Lan Zhan asks. The wind carries away most of the drums, the splash of paddles through the water. From this distance it’s impossible to see the effort it takes to row. He sees the sun flash against pale paddles, hypnotic in its rhythm, fast as a heartbeat. None of the sweat, the grim faces, the way they must shout to encourage each other. His head hurts, filling in the gaps, baking in the sun. If only he could lay down and take a nap. If only there was some shade. He should have brought a hat. He should have known better.

Wei Ying shakes his head, tilts it towards Wei Yuan. “Let him get bored doing this first,” he says. “If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” Lan Zhan says. His legs waver under him, and he squares them a little bit, stiffens up his knees, turns his face to catch a breeze.

Wei Ying grins. His eyes flick back and forth between the busy tent and Lan Zhan’s face. He says, “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” Lan Zhan says. Then, “You’re very -”

“Hm?”

“Relaxed,” Lan Zhan says. “As a parent.”

Wei Ying laughs. “Is that a bad thing?”

Lan Zhan shakes his head. Wei Ying laughs harder. “Come on,” he says. “Relaxed is too nice a word. What do you actually mean? I can take it. Permissive? Lazy? American?”

“Maybe a little American,” Lan Zhan admits. “I could never have acted like that with my Uncle.”

Wei Ying frowns. “Like what?” he asks, and there - a thread of potential hurt. He’s giving Lan Zhan more attention now, his eyes steady, waiting for the blow to come.

Lan Zhan shakes his head again, a little flustered to be asked. It feels self-explanatory; as if Wei Ying should know. He doesn’t have the words to describe his uncle, the way that they grew up. His fingertips tap anxiously over the bandages on his ribs. He watches Wei Yuan finish a tissue paper flower and immediately try and give it to the teacher, who laughs and gestures with his curled fingers. Presumably the gesture means, *go give it to your parent,* since Wei Yuan immediately turns, fails to spot them, and turns red-faced with the effort of holding back tears. Wei Ying lifts a hand and waves, and Wei Yuan breaks out in a sunny smile - his skin going back to its usual brown tone with stunning rapidness. He runs to them and pushes the flower into Wei Ying’s hand. It bursts apart as easily as a real flower would, raining scraps of dyed paper onto the scratched, dry ground.

“Shit,” Wei Ying whispers, but Wei Yuan has already run off again, back into the tent to make more doomed flowers.

He'd meant: like a child.

He remembers that, later on. Hours after the date had ended. After Wei Yuan had made three more paper flowers and an extremely lopsided good luck knot, which unraveled while they were eating a second round of food. Wei Yuan's mysterious best friend had been right: there had been a taco truck. Wei Yuan had given Lan Zhan one of the flowers and the remains of the good luck knot, and after lunch had succumbed to the hot sun and the excitement and overstimulation, and thrown an epic tantrum. He'd cried until it felt like he would shatter the heavens, or at least shatter the last of Lan Zhan's worn nerves.

Wei Ying had been very calm about it all. He'd scooped Wei Yuan up into his arms and held on even as Wei Yuan thrashed and then sagged against him all at once. He winced when Wei Yuan scream-sobbed directly into his ears, but otherwise just … held his son, rocking him a little, waiting it out. Lan Zhan had nothing to offer - had nothing to do except sit on the blanket next to them and stress, formlessly, unneeded. A little confused that Wei Ying seemed so unaffected by the tantrum, that he wasn't angry at all.

When it was clear Wei Yuan refused to be comforted, Lan Zhan paid for a cab for the two of them to go home, and then took a second cab back to Manhattan, alone.

I'm really sorry about earlier, Wei Ying texts him. *Thanks for being cool about it.*

By that time Lan Zhan is sitting in his living room, watching the sunset from his empty, quiet apartment. He's shirtless. He's exhausted. He's so tired that it hurts. It feels like he's bleeding, like the edges of him have gone soft and indistinguishable. He's taken off all of the bandages around his ribs, to let them dry out and scab over. He's sitting curled up on their long leather couch - his eyes out of focus, his breathing very slow, watching his skin split painlessly just above the line of his pubic hair, waiting to see what will emerge.

He picks up his phone and reads Wei Ying's message. He remembers what he'd wanted to say, earlier. That he could never have acted like a child.

It was nice. Maybe he should say that to Wei Ying. He doesn't want Wei Ying to think that he was - looking down on his parenting, or judging him.

He says, *It's fine. It was nice to see you.*

The reply comes almost immediately. *It was nice to see you too.*

Then nothing for a while. Something tender and green slips out of Lan Zhan's skin. It doesn't hurt, or at least it doesn't make him hurt more. It's the palest sort of color - barely any color at all. He touches the edge of it very gently with the tip of one finger. His phone buzzes again.

Wei Ying has sent him two photos. The first is a photo of the races, caught mid-flight: one drum mallet held high overhead, water streaming behind the dragon's yellow and green tail, the head of a second dragon just barely edging into frame. The other is the photo he'd taken of Lan Zhan holding Wei Yuan. They're both squinting into the sun, off-guard. In hindsight, the purple sticky stain appears to have transferred from the knee of Wei Yuan's shorts. Lan Zhan looks at the photo for a while. No wonder Wei Ying had said he looked tired. He looks all the way worn through. He's so pale that he looks sick.

He saves the photo anyway. He hesitates over how to categorize it. FAMILY is far too presumptuous. WORK is not applicable. CITY would be so impersonal. After a moment, he lets it be - alone in the main photo folder, undefined. His hand feels heavy. Maybe he should go lay down. Maybe he should try and sleep.

He switches back to the text app. *No photo of you?*

He receives a string of laughing emojis in return. *You know what I look like.*

The date had been strange, but this feels nice. Normal. Flirting. It's

normal to flirt. He's always thought that Wei Ying liked it when he pushes. *I'll show you mine if you show me yours,* he says. Lan Zhan knows English aphorisms too.

Ridkfjfkalsnfn is what he gets back in reply, and then six skull emojis. *LAN ZHAN!* Wei Ying says, *Warn a bitch, goddamn!*

I don't think I will, Lan Zhan tells him. The words come a little easier. He remembers what's expected. How these conversations go. He passes a hand over his belly, just to feel it. Just to feel the shape of a body he feels at home in, if only just for the moment. He doesn't know for sure where this is going - if they're doing this, if this conversation is going the places it usually would, when he's texting with a man.

He wants - so much. So many things.

You first then, comes Wei Ying's reply.

Lan Zhan looks down at himself, his long limbs, the sparse dusting of black hair on his belly, his thighs, the interruption of underwear between them, the wealth implied by the window and the view beyond his feet. He's not hard, but maybe if he tried he could get there. He'd pulled the waistband down when he'd felt the itch on his belly, and except for the little vine curled above his pubic hair, it would make for a good photo. But there it is, green and alive and unexplainable. He touches the edge of the plant again with his fingertip. It unfurls just a little bit under his touch, and turns out to be a leaf.

Lan Zhan goes into his photos, digs through the SELF folder. Picks a good one, a sexy one, and sends it.

No fair! Wei Ying squawks immediately. *You had that on deck, didn't you? Ready to go.*

A moment later he follows it up with *god you're hot. Why are you even talking to me, looking like that? Who gave you the right?*

Lan Zhan's lips curl upwards. Wei Ying thinks he's hot. Many people do, and Wei Ying has said that before, but to read it feels - it's the

best he's felt all day. All week. If only he could have been charming in person, too. If only -

The vine tickles, stretching a little further across the tender skin of his stomach.

Alright, Wei Ying grumbles. *Give me a minute. Not everyone has thirst traps saved on their phones, ready to stun unsuspecting single dads.*

Lan Zhan picks himself up from the couch and goes to his room, just in case. It hurts to move. His whole body aches with the effort of shifting itself. He doesn't know where his brother is, or when he might be coming home. He hasn't seen Lan Huan much this week. They skulk around the apartment they share like ghosts, too tender to speak to each other. He leaves the lights off. He stretches himself across the wide expanse of his bed, tucking himself into clean, soft sheets. He sets the phone next to his pillow and looks out over Manhattan, and waits. His lungs fill with air. He waits. He wants.

His phone buzzes.

It's a photo of Wei Ying, of course. Taken in the bathroom - as neutral or as private a place as Wei Ying can find in his apartment, Lan Zhan assumes. He was expecting a good photo - a great photo, because Wei Ying is a great model. He knows how to find his angles. How to make anyone want him.

Instead, what he gets is this: Wei Ying's hair is up in a messy bun. His cheeks are flushed. There's a dusting of flour on the shoulder of his tee shirt. Maybe another baking experiment with his son. He's smiling. Big and beautiful and heartfelt, his eyes crinkled, all his teeth showing.

It makes Lan Zhan's heart shudder, to meet Wei Ying's gaze - even just in the photo. He puts his hand to his stomach almost reflexively, as if he could stop the vine there from growing if only he tried hard enough. He can't look away from Wei Ying's smile. He never wants to look away, even though - among everything else he's feeling, every storm of emotion Wei Ying churns up in him just by existing - even though mostly, right now -

It makes him feel afraid.

Notes:

Thank you so much to phnelt for the beta!!

Chapter 15

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

In the dream, Lan Zhan is small. Sometimes it's a literal smallness. He is adrift in the endless ocean of a bed many kilometers wide. He fights sheets and blankets that weigh as much as houses. He's the size of a child he doesn't remember being.

Sometimes it's a metaphorical smallness.

He's made small by the fear. It paralyzes him.

The fear makes sense. The paralysis makes sense.

If you're small, and there's something big stooped over you - looming over you, weighing you down with its shadow - what can you do except wait for it to go away?

It will hurt you whether you try to run, or whether you stay there in the blankets, unmoving, barely breathing, stiff with the hope that it will think you're asleep and not worth hurting. The hurting part isn't up to you, after all. You don't get to decide if you get hurt, or when the hurt will stop.

In the dream, it's perfectly quiet. There's no hum of a fan, a cracked window, someone who could hear. He can smell rice left in the cooker. The waxy smell of watercolors left to dry in little plastic palettes. There's no footstep to warn him. No crack of light from an open door. Just that heavy weight settling down on the bed next to him. It makes his small body dip towards it, rolled like garbage is carried over the crest of a wave, towards an inevitable shore. His back brushes the thing that's so much bigger than he is. He doesn't flinch. He learned a long time ago not to flinch.

And then -

Nothing happens.

Nothing ever happens.

He doesn't hold his breath. He knows better than to hold his breath, because only people who are awake hold their breath, but still the air fills and fills his lungs no matter how much he tries to push it out, to be nothing but limp, asleep, not running,

The weight moves, it moves *him* - it reaches for him -

- and then he wakes up.

His eyes fly open.

He bolts upright.

He moves before his body really knows he's awake. Uncoordinated, he falls to his knees on the floor of his room and keeps going, scrambling for the bathroom. He makes it, barely. The fear forces itself up from his stomach in a cramping, agonizing wave. The tile floor is cold under his knees. He retches so hard he thinks that on the next one, he'll bring up blood, or plants. He has a moment to think of it - to think of vomiting vines, bits of leaves, pulling flowers out of the back of his throat - and then he's gagging again, so violently that he sobs with it -

Something touches his back. He flinches hard. Then, a warm voice, filtering in through the misery and fear, "A-Zhan, it's okay, it's just me, I didn't mean to scare you, shit, I'm so sorry, it's okay." A warm voice, saying warm things, and then, tentatively, a warm hand on his back. Rubbing over his spine. Rucking up the thin fabric of his sleeping shirt. Mingjue? Mingjue is in the bathroom with him. Touching him. He's -

It's not a large bathroom. Bigger than most New York City bathrooms, maybe. Not really large enough for two tall, fully grown men to crouch in. But here Mingjue is, crowded on the cold tile floor, comforting Lan Zhan. His big hand rubbing ceaseless, smooth circles over Lan Zhan's back as he leans over the toilet bowl and

throws up yellow bile. Mingjue gathers Lan Zhan's hair back, leaning away just long enough to fumble through a drawer and come back with a hair tie that he clumsily pulls all of his long hair through.

Then he goes back to rubbing Lan Zhan's back, and telling him he's okay. The tone of his voice is so soothing that it confuses Lan Zhan - sure that it's someone else Mingjue should be speaking to like that.

Eventually, Lan Zhan runs out of things to throw up. Mingjue helps him sit back against the wall. Mingjue stands up and flushes the toilet for him. Says, "I'm going to get some water for you, okay?" Okay. He leaves the door open when he goes. Lan Zhan stares at nothing for what feels like a long time, dazed and hurting, unable to do anything but shiver on the cold floor. When Mingjue comes back he can't hold the cup for himself, so Mingjue lifts it to his mouth, very carefully.

"That's it, buddy," he says as Lan Zhan drinks. "Here, have some more. You got it? Okay."

Lan Zhan pushes water through his teeth, chasing away the ghost of bile. "Where's," he croaks. "Where's my -"

"Your brother sleeps like a corpse," Mingjue says, as if that had been a full sentence. "I heard you crashing around out here and came to see if you were okay. You want me to get him?"

Lan Zhan shakes his head. Drinks more water. His sleeping clothes cling to his skin, tacky with sweat. It smells awful. He smells awful. "I'm okay," he says. He sounds awful too. He tries to put a hand over his face and misses, his fingers flopping painfully against his collarbone.

"Are you?" Mingjue says skeptically. Lan Zhan flinches, but Mingjue doesn't seem to mean anything by it. He looks half asleep still. His face is creased from the pillow. He's shirtless, un-self conscious about it. Lan Zhan has never seen all of his tattoos before. His eyes trace over the thick black lines, the delicate color, the skin and muscle and heart underneath.

After a moment, Lan Zhan shakes his head.

“You wanna talk about it?” Mingjue asks.

Lan Zhan’s breath catches in his throat.

After a long while, when Lan Zhan says nothing, Mingjue nods. He scoots sideways on his butt, puts his back against the wall next to Lan Zhan, and puts his arm around Lan Zhan’s shoulders. Tips him forward, into - into a hug. They’re hugging. Mingjue is hugging him. “Okay,” he says. He pats Lan Zhan’s chest twice with his other hand, and then just - holds him. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Lan Zhan echoes, and closes his eyes - too afraid to move, in case Mingjue pulls away.

-

By the time Lan Huan wakes up, Mingjue - complaining of his back - has bullied Lan Zhan into the living room, wrapped him in the couch blanket, turned on Netflix, and fallen back asleep. The creak of the door wakes Lan Zhan out of his own stupor. Lan Huan creeps forward on his toes, noiseless. By the time he’s come close enough that Lan Zhan can see him, his expression is smoothed into nothingness.

“Hey,” Lan Huan says softly. “Everything okay?”

Lan Zhan swallows. “I had a nightmare. He came to see if I was okay.” It feels like a strange thing to admit to. He can still feel the warmth of Mingjue’s heavy arms around him, the density of his chest. He can barely remember the last time anyone touched him and it wasn’t sexual. Miriam hugged him the other day. And Wei Yuan. Before them - a blank. For years. He feels very sad about that,

very suddenly. It drips over him like rain, blotting out just about every other emotion. He's so tired. He's been so tired for so long.

"Are you going to be okay for the merchandise meeting?" Lan Huan asks.

Lan Zhan squeezes his eyes closed. It feels like moving mountains to open them again. "Yes," he says.

Lan Huan is quiet for a long time. He leans forward and wraps a hand around Mingjue's ankle, which is kicked up onto the couch. He looks tired too. His hair is unbrushed. The skin under his eyes is dry. "Don't worry about today," Lan Huan says finally. "We're going to fight, right? We're not going to lose what you've worked so hard for."

Mingjue is frowning in his sleep, his lips pushed up into his mustache. Lan Zhan shifts a little inside his blanket. "We," he says.

Lan Huan looks up. "What?"

"What we've worked for," Lan Zhan elaborates.

Lan Huan smiles. "Oh," he says. "Yes. You're right."

He looks back at Mingjue. Rubs a thumb gently over the wide bone of Mingjue's ankle. His lips press together. "You didn't, ah. Say anything to him. About -"

Lan Zhan shakes his head.

Lan Huan closes his own eyes and nods. "Thank you," he says.

Lan Zhan shakes his head again, turns his face away. He doesn't even know what's playing on the TV. Looks like some kind of cooking show. Lan Huan looks at it too, and they watch it in silence for a few minutes before Lan Huan says, "You know, I can't believe you still dream about him."

The way he says it sounds bemused. Dream-like in itself, as if the words are coming from someone else entirely.

“Is it a him?” Lan Zhan asks, and finds himself echoing that same strange tone.

They look at each other, and then they look away.

“I’ll make some tea,” Lan Huan says, and goes to do that.

-

They all take a cab in together: Lan Zhan, Lan Huan, and Mingjue. Mingjue volunteers himself for the front seat, to leave space for all of the boards and bags that Lan Zhan has brought with him, and spends the ride making friends with the driver. Lan Huan and Lan Zhan spend it in silence. They ride the elevator up in silence, too. Mingjue doesn’t seem bothered by it. He smiles over his phone, laughing at something. “My brother,” he says, when Lan Zhan glances at him, “he’s crazy.” And then he laughs again, shaking his head.

Lan Zhan peels away to drop his things off in his studio. The room is cold and dark; Miriam hasn’t arrived yet. Her last day is the end of the week. She’s already taken most of her personal belongings home. He sets his bag down at his desk and stands there for a moment, looking around the empty studio. How still it all looks. How pointless. He looks at the presentation materials he needs to gather up - his favorite samples, sitting patiently on hangers, waiting to get forced onto the mannequins in the conference room. It doesn’t seem like enough. Is there more he can do, before the meeting? Notes. He should make notes. They always ask him the same things: his inspiration, his vision. He can write answers down ahead of time so that he sounds better, more confident, more engaged.

He’s so sad.

It occurs to him gently, as simple as a fact. He's tall. He's Chinese. He's an apparel designer. He's sad. He's so, so sad.

Is Miriam right?

Can they win?

Or will Interwoven eat them for parts, the way they've done to so many other companies, so many other brands?

He shakes his head. He pulls out his phone. Stands for a long moment, gripping it so hard that his skin is bloodless around the edges. He should - he should make notes. Plan what he'll say. His inspirations.

He opens up his photo app instead. He'd saved the photo of Wei Ying from the other night. It's still in his general gallery next to the photo of Lan Zhan and A-Yuan, waiting patiently to be filed away - somewhere, somehow. He opens the photo and looks at Wei Ying's smiling face. That smile had been for him. The generosity of it is staggering, as if Wei Ying had reached through the screen and knocked him hard on the chest, hard enough to send Lan Zhan sprawling. He's been hit like that before, he thinks. The ache of it feels familiar, like an old shirt. He takes a shuddering breath, and then another.

Wei Ying had texted him last night, after Lan Zhan had gone to sleep. Lan Zhan opens up the app and looks at the message, at their conversation. He hasn't seen Wei Ying since the Dragon Boat Festival last weekend, but they've been texting almost constantly since.

What are you doing for pride? was the last thing Wei Ying sent.

Lan Zhan thinks of texting back: *I'd like to spend it with you.*

I'd like to be with you all the time.

I'm so tired.

I don't know how much more I can take.

He thinks of saying: *I am growing plants out of my body, and it hurts all the time, and I am very lonely.*

He thinks of saying: *When we were children, my brother and I were forbidden to tell anyone how our parents died. My brother was punished for it once. I never was, because I've never told anyone. I want to tell you, though.*

He thinks of saying: *You are the best thing to ever happen to me. Knowing you hurts too, and it scares me.*

He lifts the phone up and takes a selfie, to send to Wei Ying - to say what he can't find the words for, to say at least: *I am thinking of you.* But nothing looks right. He can't take a good photo. He purses his lips together and deletes all of his attempts. In the end, he doesn't say anything.

-

Wen Qing sits alone in the conference room. There are half-empty bottles of water littered across the table. Empty paper cups piled high in an insufficient trash can. Her glass travel mug is mostly empty. She has her phone in her hands, and when Lan Zhan opens the glass door of the conference room her fingers stop moving. "Are you okay?" she asks.

Lan Zhan hangs his garment bags on the rack. He stands there for a moment, trying to remember what comes next. "Yes," he says.

"Really?" she says, very skeptically. "You look sick."

"I'm fine," Lan Zhan says. He keeps his back to her as he dresses the mannequins. The glass door squeaks open, and Miriam slips through.

“Hey, good morning,” she says, and moves towards the boards to set them up before she stops, frowning. “John, are you okay?”

Lan Zhan presses two fingertips against his forehead. They come away sweaty. Wonderful. He doesn't have time to dip back into the studio for his face papers before the meeting starts. “I’m fine,” he says. “Please help me dress the mannequins.”

They do. Miriam watches him from the corner of her eye, but doesn’t ask again. Wen Qing doesn’t take up her phone, just sits and watches them work. The glass door opens again for Paul, who leaves it open behind him. Lan Zhan keeps his back to the room for as long as he can. The room fills with the sounds of other bodies, the smell of Keurig coffee, laughter from jokes that don’t quite translate.

“Go ahead and start whenever you’re ready,” Paul says eventually. Lan Zhan isn’t facing him, but the sound of his voice is distracted, as if his attention is on his phone instead of their presentation.

Miriam comes and stands next to Lan Zhan. Surreptitiously, she puts her small hand into his and squeezes, just long enough for him to squeeze back - and then she lets go.

When he turns around, Lan Huan is there, sitting next to Lan Zhan’s empty seat. He looks as tired as Lan Zhan feels. He smiles when Lan Zhan meets his gaze. He gives a little nod: *go ahead.*

So Lan Zhan does. He opens his phone to the notes app. He goes through each mannequin’s look. He walks them through the rest of the sketches, which at this point are nearly completed tech packs: complete illustrations of their own, with endless photos of mocked up samples, sewing instructions, construction guidelines and allowances. He tells them of his *inspiration*, his *vision* - which had started out as water in all its seasons and permutations, and grown to be something else.

There’s a moment of contemplative silence. Brian and Michael exchange glances that Lan Zhan doesn’t know how to interpret. Lan Huan’s eyes are moving over the mannequins, his fingers laced in front of his chin. He doesn’t let Lan Zhan catch his eye. Paul takes a

big breath, his arms crossed over his chest. And then shakes his head.

It's Brian who speaks first. "I don't know!" he says. "I don't know, I just don't know. These are - they're just really strange, John."

"Off trend," Michael says.

"All of our forecasting says to stay away from florals for spring," Brain agrees. "All the other divisions are doing big, bold patterns - neons, oversized houndstooth. Animal prints! Stuff like that. And tight silhouettes, all bodycon sort of stuff. You know? This is really out of step with what the rest of the company is doing."

"What does it matter, what the rest of the company is doing?" Lan Zhan asks. For once, it's an effort to keep his voice flat. "ORCHiD has never followed your trend forecasts."

Michael laughs. It's an ugly sort of sound, and bursts condescendingly from his chest. "Yeah, we *know,*" he says. "And look where it's gotten you."

At Lan Zhan's side, he feels Miriam bristle. "There's no need for that," Wen Qing says, before either of them can speak to defend themselves. Her nails drum against the glass conference table, just once.

"Aw, come on, Qing," Brian says. He flaps a hand towards the mannequins and the samples and all of Lan Zhan's hard work. "Who the hell is gonna wear this stuff? Where's she gonna wear it?"

Lan Huan clears his throat. All eyes turn towards him. Lan Zhan's breath comes hard through his nose. His fingernails bite into his palm. He tries to relax his hands. He puts them both behind his back when he fails, where at least all the white people can't see him lose control. He fixes his eyes on his brother, anticipating Lan Huan's defense.

"This collection," Lan Huan begins, his tone delicate, "is not a departure from ORCHiD's brand identity, and we think that it will resonate with our core customer. You remember from last year's

market research that our customer is fashion forward, loyal to specific brands, and comfortable taking risks. There's no reason to think they won't respond positively to this collection, which is -"

Lan Huan takes a breath. He meets Lan Zhan's eyes just for a moment, just long enough for Lan Zhan to feel his own heart thump twice against his chest, as wildly as any other time in his life that he cried out for his brother.

" - creative," Lan Huan finishes. The corners of his eyes crinkle. "Thoughtful. And beautiful."

Lan Huan looks at Paul, sitting sprawled in his chair across the wide conference table. Paul has always slouched, as long as they have known the man. He slouches far enough that it rucks the line of his shirt up the back of the chair, which would leave almost permanent creases if his shirts - invariably white button ups, invariably from Brooks Brothers - weren't of good enough quality to hide the wrinkles he leaves on them. Lan Zhan hated the man almost from the start, if only from the way he sits: lazy, and in total disregard for the clothing he wears. Paul sits like a television portrayal of an American businessman, or like a predator. His elbows cock out to each side, forcing Michael to retreat to the other side of his chair and turning Wen Qing into rigid, unyielding rock.

Paul tucks his chin towards his chest and says, "Hm."

Lan Huan dips his own chin. Turns away from where Lan Zhan and Miriam stand, towards Paul and everyone else sitting at the conference table. In contrast to the Americans his posture is neat, the lines of his clothing crisp. He lifts a hand and tips his palm towards the popcorn ceiling. "But we do of course understand your concerns," he acknowledges.

"This is not a commercial collection, Stephen," Paul tells him, almost kindly. "If you're trying to make up for your budget problems, this is a step in the wrong direction."

"I understand your concerns," Lan Huan repeats. He leans forward onto his elbows. "And I agree with you, actually. As beautiful as I think this collection is, it *is* different. And that's a problem."

A problem? Lan Zhan's hands flex around nothing. Did he hear that right? Has he forgotten how to speak English? A *problem?*

"I know over the last few years we've pursued a strategy of aggressive growth," Lan Huan says. He looks down at the table regretfully. "But I think that would be a mistake to invest too heavily in a collection that we might not have - ah, full confidence in its salability. I think it would be a good idea to reduce production quantities, from the numbers we spoke about last week. To - well, what do you think, Paul? Twenty five percent reduction, year over year? Or thirty percent?"

It's unbearable. "Gege!" Lan Zhan says.

But Lan Huan doesn't look at him. His head turns just the barest amount and he says, low and even, "We'll talk about this later."

Lan Zhan flinches. It's a full body twitch, like a muscle hours after you've overworked it. He's been wound so tightly for so long that it hurts - or at least, it hurts to *stop* flinching, to kill the reaction dead before it can be noticed. He's been numb, too, for long enough that the pain actually surprises him, how sharp it is in his chest. Stunned, he doesn't say anything, and for a moment doesn't even realize - his brain trained by his surroundings into English, English, *English* - that Lan Huan had spoken to him in Chinese.

It's only when Brian sing-songs, "Stephen, are you keeping secrets?" that Lan Zhan thinks, *oh* - and like a film in reverse he can breathe again, slow and thin through the ache in his chest, lingering despite the steadiness of Lan Huan's shoulders and a lifetime of trust resting on them.

Lan Huan turns back towards the conference table. At the angle Lan Zhan can see him from, his smile looks sharp. He tells Brian, "No." And nothing else. It's a complete sentence.

Paul sighs heavily. He asks, "Stephen, if you also don't think the collection will sell, why are we even making it?"

Lan Huan's tone is tactful. "I think it's best to be prudent, that's all," he says. "And just because I don't think we've gone in a commercial

direction doesn't mean -"

"Stephen, Stephen," Paul groans. "Come *on,* don't give me that kind of shit, just say what you mean."

" - *doesn't* mean," Lan Huan repeats, undeterred, "that I think this collection has no potential. I think, with the proper support from Marketing, we'll be fine. What about an editorial advertising campaign for the launch? Partner with the ecomm team for a presale event?"

"Not gonna ask for a budget for influencers?" Michael says sourly.

"I was getting there," Lan Huan says. "A budget for influencer marketing as well, please."

"You don't want much, do you?" Paul says.

Lan Huan smiles. "Paul," he says, settling his elbows on the table. "I want the same things you do."

-

After, Lan Huan helps them undress the mannequins. Gather up the presentation boards. Put samples back on hangers and into garment bags. Lan Zhan doesn't usually let him help; Lan Huan has torn a few samples over the years. It's not until they're back in the studio that Miriam exhales loudly, slumping over her desk in exaggerated relief. "I am *exhausted,*" she says.

Lan Huan drops his armful of garment bags onto the drafting table. "Yeah," he sighs.

Lan Zhan picks up the pile from the table, goes to hang everything

up on the rack where it belongs. He gives himself a moment to smooth his hands over the bunched together garments, soothing and cool against his palms. “Gege,” he says.

Silence from behind him. The sound of Miriam’s chair, scraping over the floor. “Should I um,” she says. “You know what, I’ll let you guys talk. John, I’m gonna just, I’ll take a late lunch. Cool?”

“You can leave early for the day, if you’d like,” Lan Zhan says.

“Oh,” she says. “Uh, sure. You want me to finish the clean up before I go?”

“No,” he says. “I will do it.”

He listens to the soft sounds of her gathering her bag, her coat, whatever else. He glances over his shoulder, just far enough to see the swing of her ponytail as she heads towards the door. “Thank you, Miriam,” he says, “for all of your hard work today.”

“Yeah,” she says. She opens the studio door, letting in the smells of other people’s lunch, the hum of cubicles stretching outwards, nearly the length of a city block. She blows air through her nose. Hesitates. “Look - I’m rooting for you guys, you know. I really am.”

“Thank you, Miriam,” Lan Huan says, soft and sincere.

The door swings closed behind her, and they’re alone. The air conditioner hums. The sounds of the office are muted, but not gone entirely.

“I should have told you what I was thinking,” Lan Huan says finally. “I’m sorry, A-Zhan. It wasn’t fair to spring that on you during the meeting. Although it might be helpful overall, that you reacted so negatively. I don’t want them to realize that we’ve started thinking strategically.”

Lan Zhan takes a deep breath. His fingernail catches on the leather trim of an epaulette, traces the edge of a brass button. One of the samples from the meeting is hanging crookedly on its hanger, and he straightens it carefully.

“They have been *fucking us* for *years,* A-Zhan,” Lan Huan says, more viciously than Lan Zhan has ever heard him speak, ever. “All that overstock inventory. How are we supposed to do business like this, with all of our money tied up in goods we can’t sell? They knew the whole time that ORCHiD couldn’t support that kind of growth.”

He’s pacing - moving restlessly back and forth in the studio space. “Forty three percent,” he says. “That’s how much of Resort we’ve sold through. That’s it, A-Zhan. Less than half, and it’ll all be on a boat and on its way here in less than thirty days.”

Lan Zhan presses his lips together. There’s the creak of a chair - Miriam’s chair. Lan Huan has sat down at her desk. His ankles are probably crossed. His hands folded on the desk in front of him. His gaze is unwavering, fixed on the back of Lan Zhan’s neck. Waiting him out.

“That’s the first time you’ve ever told me,” Lan Zhan admits, after a moment. Lan Huan has always been the patient one, of the two of them.

“Told you what?”

“That anything is wrong,” Lan Zhan says. He turns around, finally. His brother is sitting at Miriam’s desk, exactly how Lan Zhan imagined except for the scowl on his face. Lan Huan’s ankle twitches once, hard - betraying how angry he is even more than his expression. It’s hard for Lan Zhan to meet his brother’s gaze. His spine feels like it will crack with the effort. But it works - Lan Huan looks away first.

“I *do* believe in the collection,” Lan Huan says, and lets his head fall back towards the ceiling. His eyes close. “I believe in *you*. The work is beautiful, A-Zhan. It really is. Don’t take anything I said in the meeting to heart.”

Lan Zhan takes a step forward, and then another. His nails dig into his palms. His back itches, and for once he recognizes the sensation for what it is. “Do you think that’s what I care about?” he asks. “Whether you think the clothes are pretty?”

Lan Huan's jaw moves, chewing around whatever he isn't letting himself say. "A-Zhan," he says finally. "If they're willing to reduce the order, who cares why? Do you want to get stuck with another three hundred thousand dollars in unsold inventory? All of our budget is tied up in Resort, *everything*. We don't have the money anyway, to build the same kind of orders for Spring." He blows air through his nose. "Especially since the unit price for all of the new styles is going to be insane."

Lan Zhan is almost at the drafting table, now. The presentation boards are still neatly stacked where Miriam left them. Scraps of fabric stick out from the edges of the pile. A faint dusting of glitter makes a halo around it. "Do you think," he says, "that I care about the money?"

"You should," Lan Huan says. "You're going to have to."

Lan Zhan stops. His breathing feels very loud in the enclosed space. Somewhere, his phone is buzzing. They're both perfectly still, and perfectly silent. They watch each other. Lan Huan isn't having any trouble meeting Lan Zhan's eyes now. He asks, low and angry, "What exactly do you think I'm trying to do, A-Zhan?"

Lan Zhan licks his lips. The question feels like a trick, though Lan Huan has never played tricks on him. He never asks questions to trap or confuse Lan Zhan.

But he does *lie,* Lan Zhan reminds himself. He *lies*.

"Save the company," Lan Zhan says uncertainly, but it feels like he's guessing. Guessing wrong, from the look on Lan Huan's face. But he doesn't know what the right answer is. He doesn't know what Lan Huan is trying to tell him. He doesn't know what to do.

Lan Huan sighs. He leans forward in Miriam's chair and presses his palms together, tapping his fingertips to his mouth. His expression shifts, but Lan Zhan doesn't know how to read it any better than he could guess at how to fix this.

He can feel it - the chasm of something growing between them. It's as though the studio itself is growing, or as if Lan Huan is moving

away from him very rapidly. Or is Lan Zhan the one pulling away?

Abruptly, he's afraid. It's a childish sort of fear, consuming and selfish. He is losing everything. He sees it clearly, for just a moment: the end of everything they've worked for, everything that makes up the fabric of their world, their income, their apartment, their lives - and then, worst of all, each other. Lan Huan is looking at him so … so *coldly,* so strangely, that it's as if they don't know each other at all.

Lan Zhan sits. He folds his body onto one of the stools that live pushed under the drafting table, and makes his posture soft. He hit his growth spurt only a few months after Lan Huan's, despite all the years between them - as if his whole body couldn't stand to be so far behind his brother. Lan Huan watches him do it, and softens too. His shoulders slump. His hands relax enough to separate. He rubs his thumb over his chin and then, rapidly, under both eyes, even though they seem dry enough to Lan Zhan.

"Gege," Lan Zhan says, and Lan Huan shuts his eyes tightly, as if the sound of the word hurts him. "Gege, do you want to get drunk?"

Lan Huan's eyes open. For a second he looks as scared as Lan Zhan feels. "You -" he says, and then laughs. It's a brittle sort of sound, but Lan Zhan glows to hear it. He grips the metal rim of the stool, feels the sharp underside bite into his fingers. "Yes. Yes, I would love to get drunk. With you? Yes. Cocktails?"

"Apotheke?" Lan Zhan suggests.

"Perfect," Lan Huan says. "We can get dinner beforehand."

"Noodles?" Lan Zhan asks, and as he expects, Lan Huan smiles.

They eat hand-pulled noodles with beef tendon, around the corner on Bowery. The table is glass-topped, with a sticky plastic cover underneath, printed with flowers. The menu is written on the wall in Chinese, on bright orange paper. Their table collects empty bottles of Tsingtao. They talk about nothing in particular: movies they've both seen, strange people on the subway, speculation about a restaurant opening up across the street from their apartment. The conversation is stiff at first, and relaxes as the green bottles pile up. Lan Huan scoots his chair closer to Lan Zhan's to take a selfie of the two of them, and then opens WeChat and sends it to Meng Yao. He leaves his chair closer by accident, and Lan Zhan sips his beer, tries and fails not to lean towards him.

He texts Wei Ying, when he's full of noodles and Tsingtao. *For Pride I am going to brunch with my brother and his boyfriend and some of their friends. Usually we go to the parade afterwards. Or to the West Village for the party.*

He doesn't get an answer until they're at Apotheke, crouched over a table too small for the two of them, their knees knocking together around the edges of it. The taste of liquor lingers on his tongue as he reads Wei Ying's text, briny and sweet.

oh you are so bougie Lan Zhan!!! Wei Ying says. *of course you go to the village lolololol*

Would you like to come with us? Lan Zhan asks, feeling bold and warm and safe. Lan Huan is smiling again, partially turned in his seat to chat with a group of girls sitting at the table next to theirs. It's early, and the tables are only half full. The lighting is muted, dangling overhead in the form of antiqued lanterns, dissipated into the velvet furnishings. Later the music will get very loud; later it will be so crowded that the bar will be swallowed up entirely, along with the white-coated bartenders behind it. For now, he has his brother, and they are getting drunk together.

nooooooo thank youuuuuuuuu, Wei Ying replies immediately. It's nice that he answers quickly. It gives Lan Zhan less time to think. *too much drinking downtown for me. i was kinda thinking id go to the*

protest. the one that walks uptown, you know? there's speeches and stuff that happens once you get to the park. more inclusive, more political. no corporate sponsorships, not really a party scene lol.

Lan Huan is laughing. He likes to be drunk. Their table collects more empty glasses, which are whisked away and replaced with full ones, decorated with mussel shells and chocolate pearls, delicate white daisies, duck feathers. Lan Huan's smile is warm. He wants to try every cocktail on the menu. He is laughing. Lan Zhan doesn't like to be drunk, but he likes the laughter, he sinks into it happily - his brother's and the people around them, the empty spaces of the bar starting to fill in. Lan Zhan's fingertips are numb and clumsy around his cocktail. There's a thick pane of glass between him and the world. It's nice. It makes everything feel much more quiet.

Sounds fun, Lan Zhan replies. Lan Huan's hand lands heavily on his shoulder. He wants to take another selfie. He shows it to Lan Zhan afterwards. Their faces are pale against the weathered brick behind them. Lan Huan is smiling so hard his cheeks are puffed out. The flash has turned Lan Zhan's eyes gold. His mouth is slack, a little open, his expression empty all the way through.

"That's a good picture," Lan Huan shouts into Lan Zhan's ear, and tabs over to WeChat to send it to Meng Yao. In Lan Zhan's hands, his own phone buzzes as if in answer. Another text from Wei Ying.

you wnat to come with me?

Notes:

Happy Halloween everyone! Stay safe, stay warm, and for the Americans here, go vote (as long as you're voting for Biden, and no that's not a joke.)

There's going to be an adjustment to the posting schedule going forward - I'm in the middle of writing chapter 16, so that will be posted once it's

completed, but then I'm going to hold the rest of the story until it's all complete. Then the last act of Roots will go up over a few days. I'm expecting to hit 20 chapters as expected. Thanks for your patience while I get the story finished!

Chapter 16

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

The morning of Pride, Lan Zhan wakes early. There's no reason for it. The apartment is empty and quiet. Lan Huan had stayed over at Mingjue's last night; the plan is to meet in the Village in the early afternoon, at a Mexican restaurant that Mingjue's little brother recommended. Bottomless margaritas, a good brunch menu, and enough space to fit a big party. Mingjue had made the reservations more than a month ago, for a party of five that's ballooned to ten. The additional people are mostly Mingjue's little brother's friends. Lan Huan hadn't even asked Lan Zhan if there was anybody that he'd want to invite, knowing that there wasn't. Well, there hadn't been at the time.

He goes to click on the electric kettle, and then back to his room. He rubs ointment and cocoa butter over his arms and chest and shoulders to help reduce the scarring that's developed there. He does the same on his back, as best he's able. He stands shirtless in front of his closet while it absorbs into his skin, debating his options. Pulls a few hangers out and lays them on the bed. Takes careful photos of each and, feeling daring, sends them to Wei Ying.

Opinions? he asks.

He's barely set his phone down on the bed when it buzzes. *hmmm,* Wei Ying has replied. *hard to tell when everythings flat on a bed. let me see you model them*

Lan Zhan smiles down at his phone. *You're up early,* he replies.

In response he gets a photo: Wei Yuan standing on the bathroom counter, Wei Ying a little behind, holding him steady with one hand

while he takes the photo with the other. Wei Yuan is bedecked in rainbows: a rainbow cape, a rainbow baseball cap, a black tee shirt that says LOVE in rainbow ombre letters. His round cheeks are neatly painted with two rainbows, complete with fluffy white clouds at the bottom. Wei Ying's face is also painted, but with the same heavy, haphazard hand that made the watercolor paintings on Lan Zhan's office wall. It looks like a rainbow threw up on him. They are both absolutely covered in glitter.

we did each other's makeup! Wei Ying says. *dont tell him but imma wash this off before i leave the house lolll*

Are you taking him to the march? Lan Zhan asks. He saves the photo. He sets his phone down long enough to put on the first outfit, which is a jumpsuit covered from collar to ankles in silver streamers. He takes a photo in the mirror for Wei Ying to see. In the photo he looks tired. He feels tired, though he slept, probably. He thinks he did, at least. It's gotten harder to tell lately.

no, Wei Ying says, when Lan Zhan leans over to check his phone. *he's going to his uncle ning's to get sugared up and returned to me once he's slept it off. parades are all a lil too much for my lil dude currently! we took him to the new year parade a few months ago and he did N O T like the fireworks. we're gonna try it again next year.*

Lan Zhan goes through the rest of the outfits, taking a photo of each dispassionately. Then he sits cross-legged on his bed, back only in his underwear, to wait for judgement. He can feel something on his lower back, just above the crest of his hipbone. His fingertips trace the tender shape of it, roll the very tip of the vine between them, but he doesn't pull it out.

you're awfully covered up for Pride Lan Zhan, comes a message a few minutes later. That's true. Last year Lan Zhan had worn a pair of shorts that barely deserved the name, along with a button up shirt that was mostly cut outs. Someone had torn it off him before he'd even left the Village, but that was alright: Lan Zhan had let him tear the rest of his clothes off when they'd gotten back to his apartment. The year before he'd worn a dress that was mostly feathers, and that had also been mostly gone by the end of the night. This year, well -

He looks up, towards the mirror that hangs on his wall. The jagged edges of his own skin, mottled and scarred and ugly despite his best efforts, looks back.

- this year was different.

Maybe I'm modest, Lan Zhan replies.

He receives back a string of laughing emojis, and right on the heels of that is a voice message. When he presses play, Wei Yuan's voice comes through at full volume. "You look *pretty!*" Wei Yuan screams into the phone.

Softer, in the background, he hears Wei Ying laughing. "Okay, but tell him which one you like best."

"Number three!" Wei Yuan shouts, and the message ends.

the people have spoken, Wei Ying says.

I humbly obey, Lan Zhan replies, and when the kettle sings he goes to fetch it.

-

Lan Zhan takes a shower.

Lan Zhan masturbates - luxuriously, taking his time with it. Naked on his bed, his skin still damp with lotion, his hand slick with lube, the balls of his feet pressed against his bedroom windows. His back stings as he thrusts into his hand, but it isn't bad. Before he comes it feels *good,* and he presses his whole body back into the soft sheets to chase the feeling, to make himself burn.

Lan Zhan gets dressed. The outfit that Wei Yuan had chosen for him is simple, practically understated: a silk lamé evening dress, sleeveless, floor length, high necked and low backed. It's silver, but so pale that it looks pearlescent. He layers it with a long blue coat, so lightweight that it swirls around his ankles as prettily as the dress. The coat is open all the way down and ties neatly at the throat. Between the two pieces, he manages to cover up every scar and scab on his body. Feeling cheeky, he sets out a pair of Comme des Garçons sneakers to wear with it, with rainbow stripes and hearts along the side. Light makeup - just foundation and a bit of shimmer powder along his cheekbones and eyes, not so heavy that he'll sweat it off in the late June humidity. He takes a photo of himself in the mirror, and then a close-up of his face. He sends them both to Wei Ying.

I hope the people approve, he says.

His phone buzzes in his bag as he lets himself out of the apartment. It's a little early still - a little past noon and hours before their reservation - but he feels restless. Pride is like that, he's found. Full of expectations. Their first year in New York, neither he nor Lan Huan had quite known what to make of it. They'd arrived only a month or so beforehand and were still getting used to the ways New York was different than Shanghai: the way people pushed less on the subway but how much more they wanted to talk, all the time. Lan Zhan and Lan Huan had tentatively gone to the parade, watched the floats and the glitter and the thumping disco basslines, and gone home early when they couldn't figure out where all the food was supposed to be. "It's nice that they have this," Lan Huan had said, back in the quiet of their apartment.

Lan Zhan sets his feet up Bowery. When he gets to Chinatown he lets himself wander a bit, zig zagging through the streets. He buys an iced coffee at random. He buys a steamed bun with salted egg. The sidewalks are full of people and the smells of crisply wet vegetables, herbs, and fresh and dried fish. His pensive mood from the morning persists as he walks: despite an orgasm, despite the lightness of his text conversation with Wei Ying. He feels - quiet. Maybe it is the anticipation of Pride. Maybe it's everything else. When he checks his phone it's to find a stream of photos from Wei

Ying, who has made it to his protest. The photos are a blurry stream of signs stretching the width of Fifth Avenue and all the way out of sight. Wei Ying had taken one of them with the camera facing backwards, stretched above his own head - the top of his hair is just barely in frame.

The second year they were in New York, someone told Lan Huan that Pride was a party, and the lack of street vendors with food made more sense. That was the year Lan Zhan wore feathers, and stayed out until the sun rose. He and Lan Huan ended the night huddled blearily over a table at Waverly Diner, eating disco fries for the very first time. He has yet to repeat the experience when sober, but it had been a good night. They'd made it back to the apartment and gotten as far as the couch, and Lan Zhan had woken up with a vicious hangover and his head pillowed on his brother's thigh. It had taken him a week to shake off the crick in his neck.

He settles at the edge of Washington Square Park, on a wooden bench shaded partially by bushes. He has a good view of the fountain, in between the various hedges and fenced-off grassy spaces that make up the park. There's music playing, and people are dancing around the rim of the fountain. Children shriek laughter over the muted thump of hip hop. A man on rollerblades glides by, flips around, and winks at Lan Zhan, laughing. He's also dressed for Pride, in little glittery shorts and a mesh cropped tank top. Or maybe that's just how he dresses every day.

Lan Zhan pulls his sketchbook out of his bag. He only has a single pen on him, and the man's smile, his head tipped back with laughter, appears in thin black lines. The sketch is as loose as the man's body was, balanced on skates that are barely more than a gesture on the page. Lan Zhan likes the look of it. He draws like that for a while. An elderly couple, dancing at the fountain. Children playing in the water, their arms stretched to the sky. Careless lines that become the park itself: the trees, the fountain, crosshatched lines where the arch's shadow falls, the people that fill the space and make it breathe.

What if this is all there is?

The thought swims up from the depths of wherever thoughts like

this come from. His pen moves smoothly over the white pages of his sketchbook, as if he's unattached to it. What if this is it?

He used to spend a lot of time like this. Growing up he had his brother and his uncle and not really anybody else, and it was easier to be alone than to try and fail at the hilariously impossible task of making friends. Lan Huan did it so easily that it was like he had been born speaking another language, one that Lan Zhan could only ever cobble together the most basic, stupid vocabulary for. Art helped, strangely. Art gave him utility to other people, and when he started making clothes it was even better, as if people were trying to learn *his* language, even if it was just to get him to make something for them. He told Wei Ying that once, that this was what he'd always done. It's probably the most honest thing he's said to Wei Ying yet. To imagine a life without design would be like imagining an entirely different person. A Lan Zhan that doesn't exist in any form.

The pen draws abstract shapes onto the page. Here and there are hands, maybe. The crease of a sleeve, the crisp line of a collar. The shape of a smile. The curl of a vine. His own hands are trained past muscle memory, something sunk down into his bones telling him to move, to keep drawing, no matter what. He turns the page reflexively, without looking down, and sketches long, looping lines that become a frothy hemline, the stretch of a neck.

Their third Pride, Lan Huan met Mingjue. Not for the first time, of course - Mingjue had started working at Interwoven a few months before. Lan Zhan had liked him immediately, and gone about wooing him in much the same way he'd wooed Miriam, which was over fried chicken and beer and with little gifts of Chinese pastries, until Miriam had accepted the job offer for ORCHiD and Mingjue -

Well. Lan Zhan had thought of Mingjue as his friend even back then, before Mingjue had started dating his brother.

Lan Zhan's phone buzzes. It rattles against the wood of the bench, trapped inside his bag. His fingers stay wrapped around the pen as he fishes it out with his other hand, a little clumsily. Three photos from Wei Ying. Lan Zhan recognizes the street he's on as somewhere up past Herald Square, close enough to the Empire State

Building that he and Lan Huan used to walk up to find something different to eat for lunch. One of the photos is a selfie. Wei Ying's makeup has been fixed: two little rainbows, one on each cheek, with fluffy clouds on the bottom. He's grinning at the camera, wide and fierce.

Lan Zhan's hand stills. The pen's noiseless scratch stops, and no more human forms appear on the page. He takes a deep breath, so deep his lungs fill with the charred hot dog and wet earth smell of a New York park. He can't look away from Wei Ying's smile. He can't even *think*. He's paralyzed, overwhelmed.

He misses China so badly, but maybe Wei Ying is right. If not that he's set down roots, but that he is living a cliche: another immigrant with big dreams, hoping to *make it* - whatever that means. It's not an American dream because it's *his* dream and he is not American, and has no desire to become one, but -

He doesn't want to go back to China either.

He doesn't want to fail.

But what if there will only be more struggles? Just endless pain and problems and heartbreaks. What if his relationship with his brother worsens, splits entirely? How could he bear that?

He's never tried to imagine what would happen if ORCHiD fails. It feels too painful to think about - really, actually painful, as if he were very sick, or as if he'd been beaten so badly that he couldn't stand up. In the sunshine, surrounded by people who will never see him again, he tries for just a moment -

And there's nothing.

Just a void where his path should be. His imagination fails him, leaves him shivering and cold in the summer sunshine. He can't picture losing ORCHiD. The thoughts that follow - *we would leave New York, get work at Yunshen, get work at another Chinese fashion label, I would never see Wei Ying again* - feel hollow and abstract. Words only, with no real meaning.

-

Lan Huan and Mingjue are inside the restaurant when Lan Zhan arrives, seated at the bar. There's a knot of people with them that Lan Zhan has met before, at similar brunches or crowded into loud bars, where you can only have the sort of shouted conversation that Lan Zhan will always fail miserably at. It's loud inside the restaurant: the tiny tables are all full, servers eeling their way through the narrow aisles to drop off guacamole and margaritas. The place looks too small to fit a large party, but it's a mystery that only lives for a few minutes until Mingjue slings an arm around Lan Zhan's shoulders and they're all led upstairs, to a skylit room that's more windows than brick walls.

Lan Zhan takes a seat next to his brother. Mingjue is on Lan Huan's other side. The assorted friends duck their heads over their menus, giggling. Bottomless margaritas are ordered for the table. It's still very, very loud. Lan Huan is the most sedately dressed at the table, with only a pair of rainbow socks peeping above his shoes, and he still has the nerve to raise an eyebrow at Lan Zhan and say, "You look quite respectable today."

It's warm in the restaurant, like it was warm in Washington Square Park. Lan Zhan keeps his coat on, his elbows pinned to his sides to keep from touching Lan Huan, or sticking out and tripping up the server. His placemat hangs a few centimeters over the edge of the table. A margarita is placed in front of him, with a salted rim. Lan Zhan stares at it. The server bumps his elbow. She finishes setting their drinks down and then vanishes. Everybody at their table is speaking English. He catches fragments of conversation over the clatter of the restaurant, the shouting joy at the other tables also pre-gaming Pride: "and then I told *her,"* "no, we decided," and "oh *honey,"* no string long enough to form a sentence in his head. Even

Lan Huan is speaking English, his head bent towards Mingjue. They're talking about Mingjue's brother, maybe. The one Lan Zhan still hasn't met. Someone bumps Lan Zhan's elbow again, throws out a "Sorry!" as they go.

"Are you sure he actually left the apartment?" Lan Huan is asking, he thinks. It's harder for Lan Zhan to hear emotion in Lan Huan's voice when he speaks English, but the curve of his cheek makes him look like he's smiling.

Over Lan Huan's shoulder, Mingjue sees that Lan Zhan is watching them. He shifts in his seat, including Lan Zhan in their conversation. "I have no idea," Mingjue says, loud enough that Lan Zhan can hear him, can start the laborious process of fitting English together in his head. "He said he was on his way half an hour ago, but -" He sweeps a hand across the space between them, as if he wants to reach out and clap a hand over Lan Zhan's shoulder, but can't quite manage it in the small space. Mingjue is even taller than Lan Zhan is, but so broad in the shoulders that he makes Lan Huan look delicate. His elbow hits Lan Huan's margarita and glances against both their water glasses. There's a skylight in the restaurant, bright enough that the rippling water throws light into Lan Zhan's face.

"Ahh, if he's late he's never gonna be able to find us once we leave the restaurant! The Village is always so crowded, it's impossible to find anyone," Mingjue says, shaking his head. He picks his phone up from the table and jabs at it with his thumb, typing something irate. He looks up long enough to say to Lan Huan, "We can just go ahead and order. If Huaisang misses the food that's his own damn fault." Mingjue's other hand is on the table, entwined with Lan Huan's. His thumb strokes restlessly over the back of Lan Huan's knuckles.

Lan Zhan's phone buzzes. He takes it out of his bag. It's Wei Ying, of course. The only other person who texts him is sitting at this table. There's no photo this time, just: *going into the park now!! Idk if you're already doing other stuff but HAVE FUN BE SAFE MAKE GOOD CHOICES FOLLOW YOUR HEART*

A second message comes through while he's reading this. It's a

string of emoji hearts, in all the colors of the rainbow.

Someone knocks against Lan Zhan's elbow, hard enough that he drops his phone. Not the server, just another patron. This one doesn't bother to apologize. Lan Zhan squeezes his elbow against his ribs and breathes deep. He takes a sip of his margarita. Beyond the salted rim there's more salt, a sourness that coats his tongue and makes his stomach clench. He puts the glass down on the menu accidentally, the words distorting as the drink sweats. He thinks for a moment of upending the whole thing into his mouth, pouring himself a second margarita from the pitcher sweating in the middle of the table. Mingjue's friends are doing exactly that already, helping themselves again and again. He could follow them. The plan - as much as anyone makes plans on Pride, or sticks to them - is for the group to bar hop through the Village, at any bar that's not so crowded that you can't fit in the door. In the park his imagination had failed him, but now the future seems crushingly obvious. There will be dollar slices of pizza, and dancing, and more drinking, and probably Lan Zhan will find a handsome stranger and have sex with them in a bathroom, and probably someone will give him coke or molly, and they'll find the heaviest, greasiest meal they can to soak it all up before drinking more, and he will -

There's no epiphany, no sudden realization. He looks away from the table, he looks back, and the thought is there on the tip of his tongue. It's been there all along. He knew it was there the whole time.

"I'm not staying," Lan Zhan says. He moves his margarita onto Lan Huan's placemat. "Gege, you can have this."

He stands up, as carefully as he can in the little space allowed. His knees knock against the table. His bag almost overturns his chair. Lan Huan and Mingjue stare at him. The assorted friends look up and look away.

It shouldn't surprise him that Mingjue is one to speak. He says, "But my brother's on his way here," as if Lan Zhan didn't know. As if he was sure that was actually true. "I really wanted you guys to meet, finally."

Lan Zhan retrieves his phone from the table and drops it into his bag. He doesn't want to see the look of hurt on Mingjue's face - and, softer, more easily hidden, the one on Lan Huan's. If he sees it, then he might sit down again, so he decides to be irritated instead. He's not committing some social crime by leaving. He's just leaving. Whether he's there or not won't even matter when everyone is drunk and fighting their way through the dense crowds on Christopher Street. It probably has never mattered. "I'll see you at home," he says, instead of anything else.

"You're coming home tonight?" Lan Huan asks suddenly. That actually does make Lan Zhan pause. Of course he'll come home. He always comes home. Lan Huan knows this. He nods, and Lan Huan nods back, as if they've made some sort of pact. "Okay," he says. "Let's talk later then."

"Fine," Lan Zhan says, and escapes - pushing away the unsettled feeling in his heart.

He doesn't run to the subway - running is undignified - but he walks as quickly as the gathering crowds allow him to. A cab would be impossible - half of the streets in the Village are blocked off for Pride, and even if they weren't the neighborhood is a magnet of steadily growing humanity. He's close enough to hear the parade: a dull, disco roar of sound passing by a few blocks north on 8th Street, the thump of music arching above the buildings and making all the windows shiver. Even below ground he can't escape the pulse of it, and it takes him until 23rd Street to realize that it's the sound of his own heart, rushing blood through his veins.

He'd looked it up, the route that Wei Ying would be marching to. The end of the protest was the Great Lawn, which was - he pinches the map on his phone to zoom in - oh, in the middle of the park, some twenty blocks north of where Wei Ying would have entered on 59th Street. He'll take the train to 81st then, and walk into the park from the west, and then -

He hasn't thought that far. Find Wei Ying, obviously. In a crowd of thousands. And then -

He doesn't know.

But it doesn’t feel like a void.

It feels like every possibility he’s ever thought of, all at once.

Notes:

Chapter 17 will be up in the next few days :)

Chapter 17

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

Central Park is a blur of joggers and be-glittered marchers, tourists and baby strollers, the rolling bedrock of Manhattan peeking out between the trees. It smells of hot nuts and dirty water dogs and horses, and the air is cool and green. Lan Zhan has always lived in cities, had never sought out nature until nature found him first, and mostly what he's thinking is that the park doesn't need to be so damn *large*. He's been to Central Park a few times - not often, and not lately - he and Lan Huan had come a few times their first year in New York. They'd gotten lost even though Lan Huan had saved three different walking tours to his phone and they'd been following the instructions for the Mall and the Literary Walk and up to Bethesda Terrace - which was supposed to be the easiest - and when they finally found their way out they were up near the Guggenheim.

This time - as breathless as he feels, this time Central Park is kinder to him. He can hear the thump of music and speeches echoing through the trees, and he follows it home. As he gets deeper into the park he passes more people coming from the march, their signs tucked under their arms, their makeup fading after walking however many kilometers through Manhattan. Not a single one of them is Wei Ying. What if he's already left? What if he doesn't want to see Lan Zhan? He could be with friends. He could have plans later. Wei Ying is always busy.

The anxiety of, of *leaving* his own plans, his brother and Mingjue, is hitting him. The further he walks the more it feels like a transgression, like he had done something very wrong. There's a fine sweat on the back of his neck. His dress makes soothingly soft

noises as he walks, swirling around his ankles. The music gets louder. When he hits the treeline and comes out into the great open space of the lawn he almost doesn't believe it - he stands stupidly for a long moment and feels the sunshine bake through the thin fabric of his coat. There are people everywhere, scattered in loose groups through the open green space. He'd seen - he thinks Wei Ying had been wearing a plaid shirt this morning, in the photo he'd sent of him and Wei Yuan getting ready. Lan Zhan paces around the perimeter of the lawn, his eyes roaming from group to group, afraid to go any closer until he sees -

And he sees -

Wei Ying.

It's a full, complete thought - chasing everything else out of Lan Zhan's head. The park, the people around him, the susurrus of laughter and music and the boom of speeches being made from the stage, all the way on the other side of the field. Wei Ying is tilted towards the stage, laying on his stomach with only a flannel button up shirt spread between him and the patchy, damp grass. He's wearing extremely short red athletic shorts that say, bafflingly, YOU WILL LIVE TO SEE MAN-MADE HORRORS BEYOND YOUR COMPREHENSION on the ass, and a fishnet shirt layered with a rainbow halter top. The knobs of his spine peek out from below the halter top, begging to be kissed. His legs are hairy and achingly long, crossed at the ankle, one knee cocked out just far enough to leave a gap between his thighs that Lan Zhan aches to put both hands into. His socks are rainbow striped and full of holes. He is absolutely *covered* in glitter. He sparkles in the sun like a disco ball. As soon as Lan Zhan touches him he'll be glittery too.

"Wei Ying," he says.

He can't see Wei Ying's face from this angle. His ankles, which were twitching aimlessly, stop moving. His shoulders lift with a held breath. When he turns he's already smiling, tentative, his lip curled in anticipation. He shifts up onto one elbow, and Lan Zhan sees the understanding, recognition bloom across his face at the same moment that smile grows bigger and bigger, and all of it for him.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Ying says. “You found me!” and then he keeps *saying* Lan Zhan’s name, over and over, “Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan,” and as he rises to his knees Lan Zhan sinks down to his, and they meet that way. The grass is cool under one knee and warm under the other, where he’d accidentally set it onto the sleeve of Wei Ying’s shirt, and the temperature difference is - *irrelevant.* Because Wei Ying is embracing him, his arms wrapping around Lan Zhan’s shoulders and his hands running up and down Lan Zhan’s ribs, and he’s pressing kisses everywhere he can reach - all over Lan Zhan’s forehead and cheeks and his mouth, oh, they’re kissing, and in between kisses Wei Ying is still *talking,* he’s saying, “You stopped texting back and I thought oh maybe I was bugging you or something and then I remembered that cell service always gets weird in the park but I didn’t actually think you were going to *come here* and find me -”

Lan Zhan laughs. He can’t help it. Wei Ying grins at him, leaning far enough back in Lan Zhan’s arms so that they can see each other properly. Wei Ying is flushed with sun and the long march, his nose and cheekbones browning in a way that Lan Zhan never allows for himself, and he smells of clean sweat and tastes like lemon, which is a mystery until Lan Zhan sees a big travel mug sweating gently on the grass next to them, filled presumably with water and lemon slices.

“You look incredible,” Wei Ying says. His knuckles brush over Lan Zhan’s cheek. There’s probably glitter there now, on his face. Wei Ying looks so *happy.* It’s so much worse to see it in person.

“I was about to tell you the same thing,” Lan Zhan admits.

Wei Ying laughs - soft, startled sounding, as if he doesn’t know. “You’re *here,*” he says, and then he’s pulling Lan Zhan close so that they can kiss again, open-mouthed, slick and sexy and intent in a way that yanks the breath out of Lan Zhan’s lungs entirely. They’re still kneeling, facing each other, and it would be so easy for Lan Zhan to pull Wei Ying to lay back on the grass, to put his hands into that welcoming, warm space between his thighs, pull down those stupid shorts, and have him right there in the sunshine where he belongs -

They break away from each other, breathing hard. Wei Ying is laughing. He takes a hand off Lan Zhan's waist long enough to run it through his damp hair. He says something in English that sounds like "Jesus fuck and all the saints," which doesn't seem like a real sentence, and then in Chinese, "Hey. Hey, Lan Zhan. Do you uh. Do you wanna get out of here? Go someplace else?"

Lan Zhan stares at him. He's so turned on that he's almost forgotten words. He's been waiting for so long to hear those sentences, to *do this.* "Yes," he says firmly.

"No one's uh, gonna be back in my apartment until late tonight," Wei Ying says. He licks his lips. His eyes dart from Lan Zhan's face to raking all the way up and down his body. He's only touching Lan Zhan with one hand, splayed over Lan Zhan's ribs, just under his heart. "Do you want to come over?"

Part of Lan Zhan remembers that they're in the middle of Manhattan, that they're surrounded by literally hundreds of people, that up on the stage someone is shouting in righteous anger - that faintly, underneath everything else he can hear the rustling of the wind in the trees, almost indistinguishable at this distance from the crush of traffic up and down city streets. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that Lan Zhan's apartment is closer and equally empty. The only thing that matters is that Wei Ying wants to go, and Lan Zhan wants so badly to follow.

-

They walk to the east side of the park so that Lan Zhan can call a cab. "Are you serious?" Wei Ying says. He's holding Lan Zhan's hand. He's pressing most of his body against Lan Zhan's side. "I live in Rego Park, it's like - *deep* Queens, Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan! A cab is

gonna be like fifty bucks. We can just take the train."

"How long would that take?" Lan Zhan asks, looking at his phone.

Wei Ying shifts from foot to foot. It presses the sharp angle of his hip against the back of Lan Zhan's hand. The temptation to pinch it is very intense. "Like an hour?" he says.

"Hm," Lan Zhan says. "The cab will be here in three minutes."

Wei Ying grumbles as they wait, and is still grumbling as they climb into the car. The trip will be, in fact, more than fifty dollars - before tip. Wei Ying doesn't need to know that. "You're spoiling me," he complains. He's trying so hard to look displeased about it. "The 6 is only three blocks away and the transfer is really easy, you Manhattan people act like we have to take six buses and a donkey to get anywhere in Queens."

"Put your seatbelt on," Lan Zhan says. Wei Ying sticks his tongue out and slides into the middle seat next to Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan thinks about biting him - pulling Wei Ying close by the neck of his silly halter top and sucking on that tongue all the way to Queens. Is this really happening? Are they really doing this?

"I can't believe this is happening," Wei Ying says. "I have jerked off to just the *possibility* of this *so many times.* I am humiliating myself just telling you that." His long legs stick into the well of the other seat, the one he's not sitting in. He's much too large to be sitting like this, squishing himself up against Lan Zhan like he can't bear not to be touching. Lan Zhan can sympathize - his hand is around Wei Ying's narrow waist, his fingers tangled in fishnet, pressing against the hot skin over his ribs. Wei Ying is laughing. His face is so close that Lan Zhan can smell the lemon on his breath, the sweat on his skin, the faded ghost of his cologne. They have been in this cab for approximately six minutes, and will continue to be for at least another twenty.

"Behave," Lan Zhan says, making himself a hypocrite by digging his fingers into the back of Wei Ying's thigh. It is completely impossible to pull Wei Ying into his lap in the little space they have, but he'd like to try. Wei Ying's laugh sounds more like a yelp.

“Why?” he asks. “You think the driver speaks Chinese? I’m not telling you to suck me off right here, though that would be *incredible*. Lan Zhan, what do you like? Tell me what you like. I’ll make it so good for you. Do you like getting your ass eaten? I’ll do it. I’m really good at it. I suck cock really good too, you don’t even *know*. You could sit on my face for hours if you wanted.” He’s giggling, like a kid getting away with something. He keeps glancing at the back of the cab driver’s head, out the windows at Manhattan passing blithely by. He likes the public nature of what they’re doing. Lan Zhan does too - so there’s no reason to play nice.

He reaches between Wei Ying’s legs, unerringly finds the head of his cock, and pinches it. Not hard enough to really hurt. Just hard enough that Wei Ying goes quiet all over, and so still that Lan Zhan can see his pupils dilate. Wei Ying’s lips are parted, and wet where his tongue flickers out over the lower one. His throat is wet too, where he’s started sweating. His cock jerks, held between Lan Zhan’s merciless thumb and forefinger. His throat bobs when he swallows. He says, “Maybe I *should* have you suck me off right here.”

“Maybe you should,” Lan Zhan agrees. He slips his thumb over the tip of Wei Ying’s cock, rubbing him gently through the horrible polyester satin of his shorts. It makes a whisper soft sound, almost unnoticeable under the cheerful Spanish music playing on the stereo. The little thrusts that Wei Ying’s hips make is almost unnoticeable too. Practically hidden below the spread wings of Lan Zhan’s coat.

“You give really good head, Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying tells him, in the same soft tone. “Top five blowjobs of my life, easy.”

“Hmm,” Lan Zhan says. “I’ll have to do better this time.”

Wei Ying laughs. “I bet you could,” he says. “Gonna have me running through the Kama Sutra just to keep up with you.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Lan Zhan tells him, and tips his head back to let Wei Ying suck on his throat.

“Oh, you’d like it,” Wei Ying says, then laughs more, tickling the

sensitive skin of Lan Zhan's neck. "Probably. Actually I never read it either. It's just one of those things. A sex thing."

Lan Zhan swallows a moan, manages to turn it into a soft *mmm* of acknowledgement. The cab driver is determinedly ignoring them, but there's no need to push it. Wei Ying's hands are all over him but finding no skin, no relief: Lan Zhan's coat and dress cover his front down to his ankles. It doesn't stop Wei Ying from rubbing the back of his knuckles over Lan Zhan's cock, trapped securely against his own thigh. His tongue traces a line around the underside of Lan Zhan's jaw, finds its way towards the place below his ears that feels directly connected to his cock. "You like a challenge though, don't you," Wei Ying breathes against his throat.

Lan Zhan kicks the underside of the passenger seat reflexively. The driver glances at them over his shoulder, and they yank apart, mostly. Lan Zhan's hand is still loose over Wei Ying's cock. Wei Ying's knuckles press firmly against Lan Zhan's. He's giggling. The car dips underground, into the Midtown Tunnel. There's no traffic, not so far away from the parade and the usual rush hours. They whip past white tiled walls and guard rails. When Lan Zhan looks over at Wei Ying it's to find him lit up from the tunnel lights, and also looking intently at him. Oh no.

"Hmm," Wei Ying says, and smiles. His palm pets Lan Zhan's cock as if it's an animal, thoughtlessly stroking over it. Lan Zhan lets his head fall back against the seat, and resigns himself for wherever this is going.

By the time they tumble out of the cab, he feels like he could vibrate out of his own skin. Wei Ying's apartment is in a blocky brick building, in a stretch of Queens composed of nothing but blocky brick buildings. Every building he can see has the same uniform windows, the same patchy shrubs, the same wrought iron fencing around the same patches of grass. Wei Ying's building has an awning, a shocking sign of non-conformity. The lobby is painted a faded yellow, with faded yellow floor tiles and an anonymous painted landscape hanging on the walls. It smells like frying oil and rice, ginger and garlic. "It's an elevator building," Wei Ying tells him, as he pulls Lan Zhan towards a thick metal door that must be the elevator. "Washer and dryer in the basement, Chinese school at

the end of the block, only two blocks to the train, we're really lucky to live here."

And then he doesn't say anything else, because the elevator door is closing and he's pressing Lan Zhan against the elevator wall with his entire body. It feels like it's been years since Lan Zhan has kissed Wei Ying. When their lips meet it feels like he's drunk. Dizzy with sensation. This is happening. It's happening! He's in Wei Ying's apartment building! Wei Ying is leading him by the hand to his front door!

"Sorry it's kinda messy," Wei Ying says. He takes his hand back to unlock and open the door. The apartment is messy, and small - full of children's toys and dusty piles of books. He lets go of Lan Zhan's hand and steps backwards into the space, a wry little smile on his lips. "Welcome to my uh, my humble abode. It's not much, probably. But like I said there's laundry in the basement, and we have like, five windows and there's *three* closets, which, I know you've probably only lived in fancy buildings since you came to New York but that's *a lot* for regular humans, Lan Zhan. We're really lucky."

Over the air raid siren of his own horniness, Lan Zhan realizes that Wei Ying is nervous. Presumably not about sex, but about this: letting Lan Zhan into his life. His apartment. The parts of himself that wear faded, ripped basketball shorts and knock-off Adidas slides instead of Vivienne Westwood. The apartment smells like old chili oil, and like the inexplicably sweet, musty smell of children. There's an enormous, decrepit spider plant hanging in one of the living room's two windows. A stump of bamboo in a glass bowl that needs a water change. There are dishes in the sink, and an obstacle course of shoes next to the door.

Abruptly it dawns on Lan Zhan that this is not a hookup.

"You," he says, uselessly. Wei Ying's mouth twitches. "It's nice." Will Lan Zhan never be less awkward? Could he ever just speak like a regular person? "Thank you for having me in your home." Oh, what a disaster. This isn't a hookup. What is this? He's floundering. He's so turned on that he might possibly die. Thankfully, Wei Ying laughs - a good laugh. He might be laughing at Lan Zhan. That's

fine. He can laugh all he wants as long as they can still have sex. In fact that sounds nice. Lan Zhan is aware that his own breathing is fast, a little desperate. Wei Ying wants Lan Zhan to be here, in his apartment. In his life. It's too stressful to even think about.

"Come here," Wei Ying says softly.

Gratefully, Lan Zhan slips his shoes off and goes. "That's good," Wei Ying says, still in that same soft tone. It hits Lan Zhan just below his ribcage, curling all the way up to his shoulders. He'd almost forgotten about that, that when they'd hooked up at Lan Zhan's office Wei Ying had called him good. He'd almost forgotten how much he liked that. Wei Ying takes his hand again, and draws it down to his cock, rubs Lan Zhan's hand over himself through his shorts. He lets Lan Zhan dip lower, roll his balls around, and then back up - looking into each other's eyes as Lan Zhan pushes underneath the waistband of his shorts and underwear all at once, and wraps his fingers around Wei Ying's cock. Wei Ying's eyelashes flutter. His skin is so hot against Lan Zhan's hand. His fingers dig into Lan Zhan's biceps. He pushes his cock, slow and deliberate, into Lan Zhan's grip.

They stumble back into the apartment like that, ludicrously connected by Lan Zhan's hand around Wei Ying's cock. "Sorry about the mess," Wei Ying breathes into Lan Zhan's mouth, though the room Wei Ying leads him into is more crowded than messy. He shares a bedroom with his son, the space divided equally between them. Two beds, two dressers. A skinny bookshelf that has children's books on the bottom two shelves, and programmer's manuals on the top. One window, Wei Yuan's little bed pushed underneath it. They tumble down onto the other one.

Lan Zhan's dress is up around his thighs, and Wei Ying is between them. The fading afternoon light makes the glitter all over them sparkle. They grind against each other still fully clothed, and Wei Ying's weight on him feels good, so good - up his spine and down his socked feet, the sharp pressure of Wei Ying's hips against his inner thighs. He hopes it'll bruise. "Oh god," Wei Ying is panting into his ear, "Lan Zhan I can't, please, slow down, I haven't had sex in like a year, do you want to make me come in my pants? You might actually kill me, you're amazing." Even as he pleads for

mercy he makes a liar out of himself, gripping Lan Zhan's hip almost painfully to hold him in place, to tilt their bodies together, to move them both in the way he wants. It's overwhelming. Lan Zhan loves it. He's going somewhere beyond speech, he can feel it. Slipping into somewhere good where the only thing that matters is fucking, being fucked. He knew that sex with Wei Ying would be incredible.

"Like this?" Wei Ying pants, "You like this, Lan Zhan? Ah, fuck - *fuck,* you feel so good, can I fuck you? Do you like that? We can - we can do anything, but - shit, how do I get your dress off? I don't want to mess it up. I want to be naked with you, Lan Zhan, let me feel you -"

"The zipper is in the back," Lan Zhan groans, and then -

He remembers everything, all at once.

His entire body goes rigid and cold.

He hears Wei Ying say his name from a great distance.

Abruptly the weight on top of him is gone.

"Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan. Are you okay? What's wrong?"

He opens his eyes to find Wei Ying sitting back on his heels, retreated down to the foot of the bed. His shorts are caught around one of his thighs. His naked cock juts out from his body, darkly flushed, a little bead of liquid at the tip. Lan Zhan gets an elbow underneath himself, breathing hard. His hips jerk reflexively, still seeking the motion of sex. "We don't," Wei Ying says, "we don't have to do anything you don't want, I'm sorry. There's no pressure here. I ah, I just thought it would be really hot. But I don't care that much, I'm good either way or like, no way at all. Lan Zhan. Are you okay?"

Lan Zhan nods. It's a reflex. The answer is yet to be determined. His entire body is buzzing with fear and arousal, almost indistinguishable. He keeps looking down at Wei Ying's cock, the long, perfect length of it. He wants, so badly, so much. But he has

to - oh, he's shaking all over. He gets his other elbow underneath him, pushes up to his knees. His coat falls down around his body, hiding him. They face each other on Wei Ying's bed. He has to - he has to say it. He has to say something.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says tentatively. "What do you want?"

"This," Lan Zhan says immediately, and flinches at how raw his voice is. "Except -"

They both breathe, harsh and silent, for a long moment. Wei Ying's cock jerks, dips a little in the space between their bodies. Lan Zhan has softened almost completely, even though his skin still feels electric, his whole body hot. If he takes off his coat his back will be exposed. If he leaves it on - it's possible. It would be weird but it's possible. He could stay completely clothed. Never actually let Wei Ying see his body and what it looks like now. He's done that before, though *before* when he'd gone out to find a hookup he'd at least been smart enough to wear pants instead, so it was only a shirt he'd have to leave on.

This isn't a hookup. It's not. And he -

He could do this and then leave and go home and never let anyone see him naked ever again.

But he wants -

Wei Ying's expression is openly anxious. It's only been a few seconds. Not even long enough to make the moment more awkward than Lan Zhan's abruptly soft cock already has. He can feel stress and fear pumping thickly through his body, seeping into his muscles. He wants -

He *wants* -

It feels like fighting all of himself, to make the choice.

Lan Zhan slides the coat off his shoulders. His hands are trembling. He folds the coat in half and sets it on the edge of the bed. Wei Ying is watching him closely, not understanding, waiting. Lan Zhan reaches behind himself, grasps the dress's zipper and drags it slowly

down. He presses a hand against his heart and then slides it up, drawing each shoulder down, baring his chest and stomach. Silver lamé puddles around his waist before he gathers it up and pulls it all over his head. He pulls his hair forward over his shoulder. Wei Ying says nothing - just waits, his hands flexing in his lap, watching Lan Zhan undress.

And then, the worst moment of his life: Lan Zhan turns around, and shows Wei Ying his back.

The worst moment is actually the seconds that follow, where Wei Ying doesn't move, doesn't react. The room is silent except for the sound of cars rushing by on the street below, the thump of someone else's music. It's hot, too. There's an air conditioner in the window, still off, that they'd forgotten in their rush for the bed. Sweat prickles Lan Zhan's temples, gathers under his arms.

Wei Ying's fingertips brush his back. Lan Zhan's spine jerks reflexively.

"Oh my god," Wei Ying breathes. "What happened to you? Who did this?"

Lan Zhan looks down at his clenched hands, his useless cock, the sparse hair on his thighs. Speaking is - almost unfathomable, but he has to. "I can't explain," he manages, which is the truth. He doesn't have it in him to say the rest of it: *I did this.* He knows what it looks like. He looks like he'd been whipped, dozens of times. His back is a lunar surface, pitted all over, criss-crossed with long white scars and barely healing holes. The skin itself is thickened, like a broken sidewalk where a tree has grown too large, or like the tree roots themselves. He can't feel most of the places where Wei Ying is touching him. The parts of him that do feel are hypersensitive, painful in a strange sort of way. He's excruciatingly aware of where Wei Ying is. Wei Ying shifts closer. His other hand is touching Lan Zhan's back too now.

"Do you want to stop?" Wei Ying asks.

Stopping is the last thing that Lan Zhan wants. He just - he just needs a moment. Before he can look at Wei Ying again. "No," he

manages, and gropes a hand behind himself. He finds Wei Ying's hip and holds on tightly. He feels like he's begging: please don't stop. Please don't go. Please.

Wei Ying's lips press against his shoulder. Lan Zhan gasps. He can't help it. Wei Ying does it again. He presses kisses along the rim of Lan Zhan's shoulder blade, the base of his neck.

"Do you want to keep going?" he asks.

Lan Zhan nods frantically. He presses backwards, folds himself into Wei Ying's arms. They wrap around him but don't stay put: instead, Wei Ying smooths his palms over the length of Lan Zhan's entire body. Up the top of his thighs, his stomach, the divot below his ribs, skating over his nipples, brushing over his cock. It hurts in a way that Lan Zhan has never felt before. It feels like his whole body is waking up, straining to be touched. His nerves remember now how much they'd wanted this. The fear ebbs away, leaving him aching and horribly vulnerable. He chose this. He chose to show Wei Ying this. It's not until Wei Ying's hand pushes into his underwear and closes around his cock that he realizes he's all the way hard again. It feels - incredible. Wei Ying's mouth is open and wet on his throat, licking and biting all of the sensitive places he'd found in the cab. His cock rubs against Lan Zhan's ass, unsubtle. They're locked together, moving like they're fucking already, and it feels *so good,* as if he'd peeled off his skin and found only pleasure underneath.

"Okay," Wei Ying says under his breath, barely more than little stupid sounds. His hand moves over Lan Zhan's cock, more confidently now. "Yeah. Fuck, okay. Hey. Lan Zhan. Lay down for me, will you? Good. That's so good. You're not gonna scare me off just with - yeah, just like that. I'm gonna - god you're so hot. You have a really nice ass, you know that Lan Zhan?" and on like that, as he folds Lan Zhan forward, guides him down onto his belly on his soft, warm smelling sheets, draws Lan Zhan's underwear down and off. His hands are on Lan Zhan's back, his *mouth* is on Lan Zhan's back, and this isn't usually the way Lan Zhan has sex, but when he lifts his chest Wei Ying lays a light hand between his shoulder blades.

"You can get up and help if you really want," Wei Ying says. His

other hand kneads the back of Lan Zhan's thigh, the wingspan of a tall man, digging into the muscle exactly as hard as Lan Zhan likes. "Or you can just lay back and tell me what feels good."

Lan Zhan looks over his shoulder. He sees Wei Ying hovering over him - red-faced, smiling, his mouth bitten-looking. When he catches Lan Zhan looking at him, he winks. Lan Zhan lays back down. Wei Ying laughs, his breath ghosting across Lan Zhan's skin. "Cool," he says, and bites down into the meat of Lan Zhan's ass. He's still laughing as the bed shifts under his weight, as he draws Lan Zhan's legs further apart and settles down between them. "By the way, be as vocal as you want," he says. "We have thick walls and I thrive on positive reinforcement."

Anticipation prickles Lan Zhan's skin. He blinks his eyes open just enough to see the hair on his arms stand up, and then closes them again to just *feel.* He's not afraid anymore, or at least not in ways that hurt. He's a raw open nerve of wanting and waiting, shivering as Wei Ying spreads him and makes good on his promise from the cab. He takes his time with it, like he'd said, his tongue soft and slick against Lan Zhan's hole, not trying to rush inside. His blunt nails sink into the place where Lan Zhan's thigh meets his ass. He makes happy noises in his throat when Lan Zhan groans, pushing on Lan Zhan's hip to help him grind his cock against the mattress. His skin leaves cool, sweaty traces against Lan Zhan's when they move together, making noise together. Lan Zhan sinks into sensation, his whole body unspooling in the heat. He lets Wei Ying pull his hips up off the bed, tuck his knees underneath him, opening himself wider for Wei Ying's mouth. His cheek presses against the pillow, his hair fanning out across it. His ass is in the air, ludicrous looking. Lan Zhan doesn't care at all.

"Stay there," Wei Ying says. "You're perfect." His weight vanishes from the bed. Lan Zhan stays put, loving it. He loves the wait. He loves being good. The air conditioner kicks on. Wei Ying returns to him in pieces of Lan Zhan's awareness: the warmth of his hand on Lan Zhan's back, the tickle of his leg hair against Lan Zhan's calves, the cool shape of a bottle of lube, rolled by gravity against Lan Zhan's knee. "You doing good?" Wei Ying asks. His thumb traces loose circles over Lan Zhan's hole.

“Perfect,” Lan Zhan echoes, muffled by the pillow.

Wei Ying laughs. He leans forward and licks, soft tongued, over where his thumb was pressing. His other hand dips between Lan Zhan’s legs and plays with the vulnerable hang of his balls. “You like this?” he asks. “Does it feel good? How do you like it? Do you like to get fucked, Lan Zhan?”

“Mmm,” Lan Zhan manages, most of a moan. He does. He really does. But he doesn’t let most people fuck him. Not even before the plants, before the scars. He doesn’t let most people peel him open this way, let him fail to work for it. Wei Ying is relentless, pinching the thin, sensitive skin of Lan Zhan’s balls between his fingers, rolling them in his hand, revenge for the way Lan Zhan had pinched him in the cab. His tongue is all that Lan Zhan can focus on, more than the aching need of his cock, the prickly heat across his skin, soothed by the thin-tasting wind of the air conditioner. He’s sweating onto Wei Ying’s sheets. Wei Ying is sweating onto him. The bottle of lube against Lan Zhan’s knee is a promise, and he almost sobs out loud when Wei Ying picks it up, snaps open the cap. A moment of silence as he wets his fingers, Lan Zhan moving restlessly on his elbows and knees. Waiting. Wanting. Gasping open-mouthed when Wei Ying’s fingers push inside him. Two at once. Both of them overeager for it. Wei Ying bending over Lan Zhan’s back, working his way deeper inside, fucking Lan Zhan with his fingers.

“You take it so pretty, Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying is saying, “You like it a little rough, don’t you? You’re doing so good. I wish you could see this too. I wish you could see what you look like.” He doesn’t seem bothered that Lan Zhan isn’t talking back. He takes his cock and rubs it against Lan Zhan’s ass, so close to where he’s wanted. He’s jerking himself off too, his knuckles kissing Lan Zhan’s skin in the same rhythm that he’s fingering him, and he’s *so close* to where he’s wanted that Lan Zhan’s patience breaks entirely, and he reaches behind himself to capture Wei Ying’s wrist in a fierce grip.

“So pushy,” Wei Ying says, and laughs more, laughs harder - nervy and excited sounding. He shifts his wrist, but only enough to tease Lan Zhan with the tip of his cock, spreading the fingers inside him and rubbing the head slickly against Lan Zhan’s hole.

"Now," Lan Zhan demands, tired of teasing, tired of waiting, as close to begging as he can force himself to get.

"Now?" Wei Ying asks, "Like this? Raw, like this?" and all the while pressing the head of his cock forward, almost hard enough to push inside but not yet, not quite. "Lan Zhan, that's so bold of you, we hardly know each other, what if I was some kind of crazy person, do you really want -" and then he groans, loud and long, as Lan Zhan lets go of his wrist and grabs his balls instead, pushing them up tight against Wei Ying's body as if he could use them as a lever to get Wei Ying's cock inside of himself. Wei Ying's hips thrust forward, three little jackrabbit fucks against Lan Zhan's ass. "Oh god," he says, low and desperate, and pulls his fingers out of Lan Zhan's hole so fast he almost cuts him with a fingernail.

"Oh my *god,"* he says again, laughing shakily, breathing hard. "Lan Zhan, please, fuck, are you trying to make me come like this? Hang on. Hang on. I got you." He scrambles for something next to their knees. Lan Zhan listens to the crinkle of a condom wrapper, the click of the bottle of lube, his eyes open and unseeing, trying not to come himself. Waiting. Wanting. Being good.

Wei Ying hauls Lan Zhan upright, back into the position that he'd kissed Lan Zhan's scars in, holding on as Lan Zhan pushes back into him, fucking Wei Ying's cock deeper inside with little, jerky thrusts. Wei Ying's arm is a band across Lan Zhan's chest that he hangs onto with both hands.

Lan Zhan has just enough presence of mind to turn his head and look for Wei Ying's mouth. He finds it smiling, and they kiss like that, Wei Ying laughing into Lan Zhan's mouth, as if there was nothing more joyful in the world than their bodies locked together, slick and dirty, finally, *finally* -

Wei Ying's hips are flush against Lan Zhan's body, keeping steady as Lan Zhan grinds against him, all the way full. His other hand is around Lan Zhan's cock, not jerking him off but just holding him there, but as Lan Zhan fucks himself on Wei Ying's cock the firm grip serves the same purpose. He's overwhelmed from all angles, hemmed in, turned on by Wei Ying harshly whining in his ear, "Fuck, please, oh please yes, god it feels good, you feel so good,

fuck *fuck* Lan Zhan, yes -"

"Harder, *harder,*" Lan Zhan chants, the only word he has left in the world.

Wei Ying laughs breathlessly. "You might actually kill me, I may die, shit," he says, and moves his hands to Lan Zhan's hips, holding him still so that Wei Ying can fuck him, his feet braced underneath him for leverage, but it's not enough, the angle's not enough, and just as Lan Zhan thinks that Wei Ying pushes him forward and down. It's better like that, braced on his hands and knees with his hair hanging down in his face, fireworks going off inside his body, Wei Ying's lips brushing his scars before he straightens up and puts his back into it, driving hard and deep and mean. It's the loud sort of fucking, sweaty skin sticking and slapping together, the air punched out of Lan Zhan's lungs in deep, gutteral noises - not a conscious or purposeful moan but a sound physically driven out of him, and behind him Wei Ying is hurrying both of them towards orgasm like it's the end of a marathon. Lan Zhan can feel it starting as if he's standing beside himself, as desperate to come as he is to make it last, to be like this forever, suspended in sex and everything good. He lets Wei Ying's weight bear him down to his elbows, shifts enough to reach down and take himself in hand, working his cock with nothing more than the slickness dripping from it. He's so close. He's sunk fully in his body, every single cell of him open and greedy and *taking* -

Orgasm tears him open, blinds him. Sensation hits the edges of his skin and keeps going, as if he has become larger than himself, like roots sinking deep into the soil. Something inexplicable flows out of him even as his spine curls and his toes cramp and his neck bends back, like warmth or gratitude or things he lacks the words to describe, even to himself. He feels Wei Ying press deeply into him, grinding little circles into the core of him, and then he too is shaking to pieces, sobbing for breath.

They collapse onto the bed in slow motion. Piece by piece. The worn sheets are soft against Lan Zhan's skin. The weight of Wei Ying, boneless and heavy before he seems to come back to himself, shifting up onto his knees to carefully pull out and roll towards the side. It's more than Lan Zhan can manage, sprawled loose on his

stomach, his hands tucked under his chest, his elbows akimbo.

For a long time they just lie there, not speaking, just looking at each other in a sort of astonished, accomplished silence. The air conditioner dries the sweat on their bodies. It's cold in the room, and getting dark. The day moved on without them and the sun is setting. Wei Ying's eyes are wide as they search Lan Zhan's face. He pants open-mouthed long after Lan Zhan has regained his breath, long after *Wei Ying* has regained his breath, as if it just feels good to breathe that way. He pushes his tongue over his bottom lip every once in a while, as if he can still taste Lan Zhan there. It's not a conscious decision to kiss him, but a necessary one.

"God, that was so intense! Holy shit," Wei Ying whispers, after a while. So soft that Lan Zhan can barely hear him over the air conditioner, the sound of his own pounding heart. Wei Ying laughs, and shakes himself all over, a theatrical shiver. He touches the tip of Lan Zhan's chin, very gently. "Are you okay?

Lan Zhan doesn't know how to answer that. He's wiped clean. He's trembling all over, twitching randomly as the aftershocks work their way through his nervous system. Wei Ying's thumb traces up from Lan Zhan's chin to the corner of his mouth.

Wei Ying says, "You're smiling."

Lan Zhan kisses the tip of his thumb. Manages a sort of incoherent noise of acknowledgement. Wei Ying's eyes crinkle as if Lan Zhan had actually said everything he's feeling and thinking.

"Yeah," Wei Ying says. "Yeah."

Lan Zhan draws Wei Ying into his arms. They negotiate the placement of limbs, tuck closely into each other. He pulls the blanket over both of them, and hides his own laughter when Wei Ying immediately starts to sweat again. Wei Ying shifts his long legs against Lan Zhan's, as if he's trying to touch him with his whole body. He tenses and relaxes, over and over, working himself up to something.

"So, uh," Wei Ying says, just before Lan Zhan breaks and asks. He

presses a kiss to Lan Zhan's collarbone. "So. Do you uhm. Wanna stay over? No pressure but. If you wanted, then. You could. Wen Qing makes a mean breakfast on the weekends and uh. I don't have school or anything tomorrow, it was just gonna be me and the kid hanging out. No worries if you can't, I just thought I'd - you know."

For once, Lan Zhan's thoughts are quiet. He can see the shape of what Wei Ying is offering him like watercolor on a page, before the picture has taken shape. The colors are warm, shot through with faded yellow, the red of blushing skin, untethered from a specific design or plan. In his arms Wei Ying is sharp, sweaty angles and warm skin, and he fits into all the spaces that Lan Zhan isn't. His heart aches. Everything about him aches. Yes. Yes, he wants that. He wants to stay. He wants to stay, just like this, held like this, forever.

He kisses Wei Ying's forehead and finds his voice. He says, "I'll order dinner."

-

Lan Zhan wakes early. He comes to consciousness slowly, gently. The sunlight is a different color than the one in his apartment, more yellow, more warm than the blue-gray light that comes off the river. When he opens his eyes he doesn't know where he is at first - just that he's warm and comfortable and the world feels very soft. He's laying on his stomach in sheets that don't smell like him. He's -

Wei Ying.

Wei Ying, whose whole body is relaxed with sleep, whose mouth is open and wet against his pillow, who is the most gorgeous thing Lan Zhan has ever seen. The perfection of him is inexplicable, breathtaking. He's sweaty even though the air conditioning is

humming away in the window. His eyelashes are shadows across his cheeks. Lan Zhan's hand is on Wei Ying's chest, right over his heart. Wei Ying's fingers are intertwined with his. And for a moment that's all that he knows: that perfect warmth. Everything essential in the world is cradled in the palm of his hand.

Then he shifts, meaning to roll onto his side and gather Wei Ying close - dim thoughts of stroking him hard before he's really woken up -

- and it *hurts.*

Every muscle in his body tenses, all at once.

No.

No, *please.* No.

No!

But he knows. Sees it, as his eyes focus and everything in him wakes up.

The bed is covered in vines. They're orange, thick, dense. He can feel where they've grown from: the way the roots have spread along his wings of his shoulder blades, dug deep into the muscle fibers, spreading along his back all the way to the base of his neck. The vines cover Wei Ying like spider webs, like an extension of Lan Zhan's hand: like he'd reached for Wei Ying in his sleep with every part of himself.

Pollen dances in the air. The room smells sweet with it. The weak sunlight coming in through Wei Ying's curtains is warmed by the plants. Light shines through the thinner leaves, bounces away from the heartier-looking ones.

Not even his worst nightmares make him afraid like this.

Lan Zhan draws himself up - slowly, because it *hurts* - achingly slowly, terrified that Wei Ying will wake and see this, see *him*. The vines move with him like the train of a dress. When he's up on his knees he reaches out - so carefully - using both hands to lift the

vines off and away from Wei Ying, bundling the long hairy edges of them into his lap. His fingers crush delicate leaves, drop petals onto the bed that he hurriedly gathers up. Wei Ying sleeps on. Quietly. Undisturbed. His fingers flex on his chest, looking for Lan Zhan's hand.

Absurdly, Lan Zhan wants to reach back. He goes so far as to shift one handful of vines into the other hand before he can check himself.

He slides backwards off the bed, gets to his feet. Wei Ying's eyes don't open. He doesn't see Lan Zhan standing trembling over him, his hands full of plants, vines falling from his shoulders. He doesn't stir when Lan Zhan - flinching, biting his lip so hard he tastes copper, bends and retrieves his dress from where it fell off the bed and onto the floor. At least the dress is nearly backless. He steps into it, pulls the fabric one handed up and over his shoulders. It *hurts*. His spine twitches with every movement. Hurts more when he stoops again to grab his coat. He doesn't know where his underwear went but Wei Ying lives with people, lives with his *family*, Lan Zhan can't run naked through his apartment, much less naked and monstrous, his arms full of things he can't explain.

The apartment is very quiet. Lan Zhan closes the bedroom door behind himself as silently as possible, does the same thing to the bathroom door. Locks it behind himself. This part is familiar, practiced. He strips his clothes off and kneels naked in the tub. The vines are so thick that there's patchy bark on them, but only six or seven have grown. Not many. They're big, and deep. But they're not like the flowers. He can do this. On the fourth he goes too fast, and the vine breaks in his hand - only partially uprooted. He'll have to deal with it later. The last one has deep roots, that he feels slither over his muscles all the way down to the small of his back.

He risks the shower to wash the blood off his back and down the drain, to soothe the deep teeth marks he left in his hand. He stands with his chin craned over his shoulder as he pats himself down with a worn Brooklyn Nets towel that'd been hanging in the bathroom. It's black, but he tries not to get any blood on it. But there's no roll of paper towels hidden under the sink. No stash of plastic bags in the bathroom. Why would there be?

Lan Zhan turns around and looks unwillingly into the mirror. There are bruises on his throat, his chest - marks that they left all over each other. His skin is bare of the makeup he'd so carefully applied yesterday. He'd only thought about sweating it off in the summer heat.

It's a mistake, to meet his own eyes.

-

Outside of the bathroom, the apartment is very, very quiet. Not empty - the little hallway has a third closed door that must be Wen Qing's bedroom, and what sounds like a white noise machine on the other side of it. There will be plastic bags in the kitchen. Probably under the sink, at least one dense mountain of bags stuffed into another bag. He can hide the plants, and then - and then -

Instead, Lan Zhan turns the corner into the living room and sees Wei Yuan, lying on his stomach, colorful paper spread around him. He's painting with the pencils Lan Zhan gave him. There's no reprieve: he looks up as soon as Lan Zhan registers his little presence, as if he could smell Lan Zhan's fear.

"Gege!" Wei Yuan says, lighting up all over. He remembers his home training halfway through the word, so that the first syllable is nearly a shout, and the second a whisper he swallows so quickly that it sounds more like a hiccup. He scrambles up and throws himself against Lan Zhan's legs. He doesn't seem to notice when Lan Zhan flinches - just hangs onto him, beaming. "Hi," he says, very quietly. "What do you have plants for?"

Lan Zhan almost says, it's a secret. But he can't bear to say that to a child. He tells the truth. He says, "I grew them."

“Cool,” Wei Yuan whispers.

He stretches up a little hand. Lan Zhan pulls them out of reach on impulse. Tries to keep his voice gentle when he says, “It’s not polite to touch other people’s things.”

Wei Yuan sighs. “I know,” he says. “I’m sorry.” He brightens. “Do you want to color with me?”

Yes. “Not right now,” Lan Zhan says. “A-Yuan, where do you keep plastic bags?”

“I’ll show you,” Wei Yuan says. He detaches himself from Lan Zhan’s calves and reaches up again - this time for Lan Zhan’s hand, careful not to touch the plants. He leads Lan Zhan into the kitchen. He talks the way his father does, endlessly. “Are you here for breakfast? We make special breakfast on Saturdays. Did you know I had a sleepover? Auntie and me painted our toenails and she let me sleep in her room. What’s your favorite animal? Mine is - mine is - I can’t remember the name. It’s big. It’s a big one.” He opens the cabinet under the sink and pulls a bag out from the mountain of bags, which unbalances and tumbles to the floor. The tiles are sticky under Lan Zhan’s bare feet. He takes the bag from Wei Ying’s little hands. Crouches down to pluck a second one from the pile on the ground, when that one overflows. Tucks the rest of the bags back under the sink. Ties the handles together on each. Wei Yuan watches him do all of this, fascinated. He asks, “Are you gonna grow them more?”

Lan Zhan looks at him. On his knees, their faces are almost even. Tries to make his throat work. “No,” he says.

Wei Yuan shrugs. “They just need sunshine and water,” he says, unconcerned. “Plants are good. Plants are my favorite animal.” He puts a chubby finger out and traces the thick outline of a vine through the plastic. This time, Lan Zhan allows it.

He stands up. Puts a hand, tentatively, on Wei Yuan’s head. Wei Yuan smiles up at him, happy, confident, good.

“I’m sorry I can’t stay and color with you,” Lan Zhan says to him,

and for once he’s grateful that his voice is flat, that his face stays so blank. He doesn’t want even a child to know how much he means it. “Goodbye, A-Yuan.”

Then he gathers his plants, his bag, and his shoes - and leaves.

Notes:

So, there will be another hiatus on this fic, but the next time I post it'll be straight through to the end. Come find me on twitter @ hansbekhart for updates and snippets.

Chapter 18

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

The message says, *You just left??*

The streets of Lan Zhan's neighborhood are quiet. It's early enough that the sun is still low on the horizon. The sidewalk is blue with the same shadows that stretch up and up along the buildings, covered in glass paneling that reflects nothing back: just that empty no-color blue.

As he walks into the lobby of his building, his phone buzzes again.

It says, *I let you around my son.*

And then nothing else. Not for a long time.

In all fairness, Lan Zhan doesn't say anything either.

-

The apartment is silent when he lets himself in. It's strewn lightly with the signs of the night. Mingjue's bag is on the counter. There are gold sequins on the floor. A handful of torn rainbow streamers. A rainbow cape across the couch. Not even the soft sound of snoring through the walls.

When Lan Zhan opens his bedroom door, there's a boy in his bed. It's not anyone he recognizes. He stands in the doorway for a long minute, and then takes the towel off the back of his door and goes to shower. He has to peel his coat off his back. There's not much blood, but it's probably not salvageable. He puts it into a plastic bag just in case, to send to the dry cleaners later. The dress fared even worse, but it's fine. You can get blood out of silk, if you know how to treat it properly. If you know -

The porcelain of the tub is cold underneath his knees, and then under his ass. He draws his knees up to his chest. It makes the skin of his back stretch. It hurts. He rests his cheek on his knees. The water mats his hair over his face and shoulders. That hurts too, where it streams over this morning's wounds. That's right. He still has to dig the last root out, the one that had broken off in his hand. In a little while. He can give himself a few minutes like this. Just a few minutes.

Water flows pink around him, dotted with glitter, and disappears down the drain.

When he comes out of the bathroom, the boy in his bed is gone. The bed is haphazardly made. There's a strange sock on the floor. Lan Zhan throws it away and crawls under the sheets.

His bed smells like a stranger.

-

Hours later, he hears his brother and Mingjue stir. Their voices creep in under Lan Zhan's door. The sound of cabinets being opened and closed. The smell of breakfast being made. Eventually someone knocks on the door, and opens it without waiting for a response.

“Huaisang?” It’s Mingjue. “Huai - oh.”

Lan Zhan opens his eyes. He sleeps with his head towards the windows, and he’d dozed off facing them. He’s not sure if Mingjue can see from the door that he’s awake.

“A-Zhan,” Mingjue says. It’s almost a whisper. “A-Zhan, are you sleeping? You want breakfast?” His fingers drum dully against the doorframe. The sound of his own breathing is thick in Lan Zhan’s ears until it isn’t: until he realizes that he’s holding his breath, and he can’t let it go. He has to - he has to let go, sleeping people don’t hold their breath, but he -

The pressure builds and builds until his head swims, until the city below him clots over with nauseous black spots, and -

“Okay,” Mingjue says, and closes the door. Not all the way. It doesn’t quite click shut, and after a moment there’s a soft metal sound as the mechanism releases, leaving the door open just a crack. Just enough to hear the sound of Mingjue’s bare feet on the floor, padding back to the kitchen.

“Huaisang’s gone already,” Mingjue says. “Your brother came home at some point though.”

There’s a softer sound: Lan Huan, not speaking loudly enough to be heard. Mingjue laughs, big and hearty. Had Lan Huan been worried? Had it mattered, that Lan Zhan didn’t come home? There had been no texts, no worried calls. Lan Zhan risks an arm showing outside of the blankets to root for his phone. *I let you around my son stares back at him.* He puts the phone down, and stares blankly out over the city. The sky is gray, even though it’s proper morning now. Maybe it will rain.

“I’m gonna call Huaisang, make sure he got home okay,” Mingjue says, from the kitchen. “And then I’m probably gonna have to kill him. It looks like he got red paint or something all over A-Zhan’s bed.”

-

It does rain. Great gouty summer storms, thick with humidity. The city swells, hot and rotten. The people on the subway grow moldy. He feels like he's forgotten how to speak. He forgets to nod good morning at the guard in their office building. Forgets to say thank you when he buys coffee. The Tuesday after Pride he goes an entire day without speaking at all, and without being spoken to either. Lan Huan isn't home much. Wei Ying doesn't text again. Lan Zhan doesn't text him either. Nobody, in fact, texts Lan Zhan at all, so he has nothing except that second condemnatory message, which he lets sit unread in his notifications so that he can look at it whenever he looks at his phone.

There are English aphorisms for the feeling those words give him, but Lan Zhan doesn't need them. He wants to read Wei Ying's last message because he deserves to be hurt. He *wants* to be hurt. He wants to be punished, and it doesn't seem as if anyone is going to do it for him. Not even the plants hurt him. His back is as bare as winter.

He wakes early.

He wakes early.

He wakes early.

He wakes early.

The morning of July 4th, Lan Zhan arrives at the office early. He uses Wen Qing's electric kettle to make himself some hot water. He lets himself into his studio, which is empty and humid and needs to be cleaned. He's thinking a little about when he might finish clearing away Miriam's desk - he's been working on Summer in fits and starts, a full collection like he'd promised Lan Huan, but it just isn't clicking yet the way Spring had, and maybe if he took a day or two to clean then it would clear his head a bit. He hasn't taken down A-Yuan's drawings either, though it's painful to look at them in the same way that everything else seems to be painful these days.

He'd forgotten that in-line inspections had been scheduled for that week; hadn't remembered until he glanced at his work email on the train that morning. The first completed garments of ORCHiD's Resort collection started to come off the production line yesterday, and they'd scheduled an inspector in to go through them - to catch potential problems before they infest the rest of the bulk order: skewed hems, poor panel matching, fraying seams. The collection is due to ship in a few weeks, and there's absolutely no room in the schedule for problems. After - well, he's cleared his calendar for the few days after Resort's ex-factory date, to treat himself to a small, well-managed breakdown. He can hold on until then.

He sits down at his desk. He opens his email.

Row after row of inspection reports are waiting for him. They fill the small screen of his Outlook window, and every single one of them says **FAIL** in bolded letters.

Lan Zhan takes a deep breath.

He shouldn't get upset before he looks at the reports. In-line inspections are an opportunity, not a grim reality, the way finished product inspections are. If the goods have issues, there's still two more weeks before everything has to be on a boat. Any quality problems can be addressed in time to fix whatever happened, and still meet the ship date.

His hands shake as he goes to print everything out.

He has a private printer in his studio, instead of having to rely on the black and white behemoth that sits out near the bathrooms, that everyone else has to use. He forgets to change out the glossy presentation paper he'd used for the merchandise meeting. When he picks up the sheets to set them in order, the ink smears a little where his hot fingers press against the page. The presentation paper is thick, impossible to shuffle or flip through, so he goes over to the drafting table and spreads them out in a single layer to see the damage.

For a long time he only stares.

His eyes flicker over the summary page, counting up minor, major, and critical defects. Comparing them to the little photos dropped into the body of the report, which show everything he was afraid of, and worse. Printed out, the defects are almost too small to see - but maybe that's just him, the world around him shrinking down until barely a pinpoint of light is left.

He fumbles blindly - no, he isn't wearing pockets today. His phone is in his bag. He pulls it out. Types with shaking fingers: *Where are you?*

The answer comes back quickly. In my office. *Is everything all right?*

I will come to you.

Lan Huan's office is next to his own, only a few steps between their doors. Lan Zhan takes them, trailing behind his own body by half a step. When he opens the door it looks like Lan Huan had just arrived. His coffee is unlidded, steaming on the glass desk to let it cool off. He's on his feet behind the desk, hanging his coat on the rack, his sleeves still down at his wrists. He starts rolling them up as he turns to look at Lan Zhan, and then pauses. "Are you okay?" he asks.

Lan Zhan puts the stack of inspection reports on his desk. Adjusts the paper so that the edges line up neatly. Steps back and stands with his hands at his sides, his hands flexing into fists. Lan Huan looks at them and then back up at Lan Zhan's face, frowning. "A-Zhan, are you sick?" he says. "You're really pale."

Lan Zhan says, “Please.”

Lan Huan looks down at the reports. He picks up part of the stack and starts to look through it. It’s painful to watch. Lan Zhan can’t tell what he’s seeing as he reads: Lan Huan has never handled product quality, never read a lab report, never made decisions based on AQL failure rates. Does he understand? He has to understand.

“None of the problems we identified on the sales samples were fixed,” Lan Zhan tells him. He’ll make sure that Lan Huan understands. “The patterns are not correctly matched, the lace style has skewed panels, and -” He takes a breath, and another when the first breath doesn’t help. “There is *mold.”* The word comes spitting out of his mouth, venomous. “The inspector found visible *mold* on four styles. A distinct,” he has to take another breath to get the rest of it out, “smell of mildew noted on three others.”

“Mold,” Lan Huan says blankly. He looks up at Lan Zhan. “That’s really serious, isn’t it? How did the products get moldy?”

“How -” Lan Zhan starts, and bites the word in half between his teeth. *“How?”*

Lan Huan makes a soft sound in his throat. “Oh, I see the reports with the mold,” he says. “Oh wow. This does look serious.”

“It is,” Lan Zhan says, very slowly, to make sure that Lan Huan will understand. “very serious. The garments will need to be cleaned and dried carefully. Even the styles that are washable might be damaged because of the hot water or chemicals needed to kill the mold, and some styles have to be professionally dry cleaned. But the problem is most likely that the bulk fabric was allowed to mold, and if that happened -”

His nails bite into his palms. If that happened - if all of the fabric is moldy -

Something is touching him. He looks down. Lan Huan. Reaching over the desk and touching Lan Zhan’s elbow, over his clothes. There’s a watch on Lan Huan’s wrist that Lan Zhan doesn’t

recognize. Silicon band, forest green. Is it Mingjue's? His eyes get stuck on it, meaninglessly.

"A-Zhan." Lan Huan says. "Sit down. Let me look through all this."

So Lan Zhan does. He sits. He watches his brother read through the inspection reports, more quickly once he seems to understand the format, flipping back and forth between the summary page, the defect list, the damning photos. He waits for Lan Huan to understand what has been done to them.

Finally, Lan Huan sets the reports down and looks at Lan Zhan. His expression is serious. Hope is a small fire in Lan Zhan's chest that he carefully stokes.

And then Lan Huan says, "Okay, let's call A-Yao."

Lan Zhan's surprise is sharp and painful. Cold. "What?" he demands. "Why?"

Lan Huan frowns at him. "Who else can fix it?"

He's reaching for his phone, set carefully next to his keyboard. Lan Zhan gets there first. It's a different shape than his own phone. A different model. It feels strange in his hands, as strange as the expression on Lan Huan's face, which is mostly surprise but not all.

"JLT won't fix it," Lan Zhan tells him anyway. "They *did it."*

This is the important part, what he needs his brother to understand. Maybe Lan Huan just isn't as familiar with how the products are made as Lan Zhan would have thought. Maybe this possibility had never even occurred to him.

How stupid they'd been, to think that Interwoven would limit their strategy to overstock and unpaid bills. The fastest way to kill ORCHiD and take control of its intellectual property would of course be to destroy the merchandise itself.

Lan Huan looks up. He looks back down at the papers in his hand. "What?" he asks. "Who did - you think this was deliberately done?"

“Yes,” Lan Zhan says quickly. He knew his brother would see. “JLT is working with Interwoven to sabotage us.”

Lan Huan’s mouth opens. The papers sag in his hands, as best as the stiff pages are able to. “What?” he says. “No. That doesn’t make any sense. JLT isn’t owned by Interwoven. What would they gain by sabotaging us? They can’t get paid for moldy goods. This would be a loss for them too.”

Distantly, Lan Zhan’s hands hurt. He’s gripping Lan Huan’s phone so tightly that it makes the bones in his fingers ache. Could he break the phone? Could he break his fingers? He doesn’t know. It doesn’t seem possible. But the pain is bright and blinding, something to focus on besides the pounding in his head, the fist around his heart. “Interwoven is a *seven hundred million dollar* company,” Lan Zhan says slowly. “JLT holds more than sixty percent of their production. How much are we paying for this collection? How much money would JLT actually lose?”

Lan Huan meets his eyes, his expression dark. He sets the reports down on the desk. He shakes his head. “No,” he says. “It doesn’t make sense to me. JLT is our partner also.”

“What is wrong with you?” Lan Zhan demands.

Lan Huan’s eyebrows arch. “What is wrong with *me?”* he asks. He shakes his head again. “A-Zhan, you need to calm down. Obviously things have been difficult with Interwoven lately, but actual sabotage? This is too much.” His voice gets softer, just a little, like he’s trying *very* hard to be soft. “These are just in-line inspections. We do them so we can fix the problems. Right? This is what you’ve told me. Now give me back my phone, and let’s call A-Yao.”

“These problems can’t be fixed,” Lan Zhan says again, and once the words are out of his mouth he realizes how true they really are. No wonder he feels breathless. No wonder he hurts. Everything that he was afraid of is happening. “All of our work, gege. Our whole lives here. All of it gone. They’re going to win.”

“Win?” Lan Huan says. His shoulders are a rigid line.

“Yes, win!” Lan Zhan says. The words come faster and faster, rushing over each other like water. “The moldy fabrics will have to be destroyed. The rest of the collection will probably be delayed. We miss our ship window, the retailers cancel their orders. We can’t pay JLT, we can’t pay Interwoven. They take everything.” He stops. His jaw hurts. His fingers hurt. His back hurts where he’s been picking at his scabs, trying to make something grow. “You,” he says, and stops. Forces himself to say it. “You *lied* to me. For *years*. But now that it matters, you don’t see?”

“I see you acting crazy,” Lan Huan says, and the whole world stutters to a stop.

“I’m not,” Lan Zhan says. The words crack coming out of his mouth, numb and cold-feeling. “I’m not crazy.”

Lan Huan’s mouth tightens. “Give me the phone, didi,” he says. He holds his hand out, palm up. He looks into Lan Zhan’s eyes steadily, with every expectation that Lan Zhan will.

He does. He gives Lan Huan his phone. The weight of it tips away, and his hands go back into his lap, useless.

Lan Huan sets the phone against the bottom of his computer monitor, turning it so both of them can see the screen. Pulls up the first contact in his recent calls, and hits send.

“Huan-ge!”

It’s late in Hangzhou but Meng Yao is still in his little office, wreathed in paperwork and cigarette smoke. He was smiling as he picked up the phone, but the smile fixes itself into something else as he takes in Lan Zhan’s presence on the screen. “Ah,” he says, “Lao Lan, is everything all right?”

They both wait for Lan Zhan to say something, but he can’t. He feels flattened. Is he angry? He’s not sure. He thinks maybe he doesn’t feel anything at all. The thumbnail of his own face at the corner of the screen is at a strange angle, unrecognizable. He hasn’t felt much since he took his plants and left Wei Ying behind. No, that’s not quite right. He feels -

“The in-line inspections,” Lan Huan says, after a moment.

“Ah,” Meng Yao says. His smile turns downwards. “I apologize, I just started reviewing the reports myself a few minutes ago. I had wanted to draft a corrective action plan before reaching out to you and Lao Wen, but I’m happy to review the results right now with you if you would prefer.”

“Yes, I think we need to,” Lan Huan says. “A-Yao, mold? That’s a very serious problem.”

Meng Yao’s eyebrows knit together. His eyes flicker back to his computer screen and stay there, presumably scrolling through his emails. He looks tired, as if ashes from his cigarettes have settled into the creases beneath his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Did you say mold?”

Lan Huan laughs, maybe reflexively. Meng Yao makes a soft sound, barely audible above the fan in his office and the pounding of Lan Zhan’s hatred. “Well, it is the rainy season, and we’ve had some bad storms here lately,” he says, without looking up. “But of course that’s no excuse. Lao Lan, I’m not seeing the reports with mold on them, can you tell me which styles were affected?”

“Yes, they’re,” Lan Huan says, shuffling awkwardly through the stiff pages until he finds what he’s looking for. He rattles off each style number. He’s looking down at the reports, so he doesn’t see the way Meng Yao’s expression changes: the way he goes very still and his eyes go very blank. It only lasts for a moment, only until Meng Yao blinks, and the smile and the life in his eyes returns.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I need to make another call. Huan-ge, would you mind if I called you back? It will be very quick, I promise. I just need to verify something.”

“Of course,” Lan Huan says. He ends the call himself. He and Lan Zhan sit for a moment in perfect silence, perfect stillness. Then Lan Huan reaches for his mouse, jiggles it a little to wake his computer up. Taps fitfully on his keyboard. There’s a privacy screen over his monitor, so Lan Zhan can’t see what he’s doing, could only see the edges of emails, spreadsheets if he craned his neck. He doesn’t

crane his neck. After a moment, Lan Huan says, “I’m sure it’ll only be a few minutes until A-Yao calls back. You can wait here, unless you have something more important to be doing.”

Lan Zhan says nothing. His fingernails scratch against the raw skin of his palms.

“You should be more kind to him, you know,” Lan Huan says. His keyboard clicks gently as he works, out of Lan Zhan’s view. “A-Yao works very hard for us. If he didn’t always agree to waive the minimum order quantities, our inventory would be in worse shape than it already is.”

The desks at Interwoven are large. It had felt comical, their first day working in America - officially, not just to stage a show at Fashion Week or to attend buyer’s meetings but *living here,* for real - the size of the desks they were given were so much bigger than most of the other desks at Interwoven, nearly as large as the conference table at their family’s factory, and glass besides, which gets cold in the lazy air conditioning and makes Lan Zhan’s teeth hurt if he sets his mug down too hard on it. Through the clear surface he can see the shift of Lan Huan’s knees, the sharp hem of his trousers at the ankle. If Lan Zhan slid forward in his seat - if they had ever been the sort of brothers who kicked each other under tables - maybe he could reach Lan Huan’s crossed ankles with his toe. Maybe. Above the glass, Lan Huan’s elbows are tucked close to his body. His jaw is set. He sighs through his nose as he sends his emails.

He’s less than a meter away, and suddenly the distance feels uncrossable, will *be* uncrossable until Lan Huan looks up, looks at Lan Zhan, *sees* him, please, *please* -

Lan Huan’s phone buzzes. They both look at it, and then Lan Huan picks it up. “It’s A-Yao,” he says unnecessarily, and before Lan Zhan can tell him not to, he accepts the call.

“Lao Lan,” Meng Yao says. He smiles. “I apologize for these difficulties. And of course, thank you for bringing this issue to my attention so quickly, and thank you for your patience while I investigated. Actually, it seems that I didn’t receive any inspection reports that were failed for moldy products. I had to put a call in to

the other coordinator to be sure, but I do have an answer for you."

Lan Huan rubs his fingertips over his forehead, pushes his hair back into place. Lan Zhan doesn't move, doesn't ask, and after a moment Lan Huan does it for him. His voice is very tired as he says, "Okay, A-Yao. How will we fix this?"

Meng Yao laughs, a little embarrassed sounding. "Well," he says. "I'm not sure. They're not my products. That's the reason I didn't receive the inspection reports. The seven affected styles were the ones subcontracted to Yunshen."

-

From the rooftops, Manhattan seems very far away. This high up you can't see the people who crawl over the island like ants, not unless you lean far, very far, over the glass and metal railing. The wind is up, but not even enough to stir the potted trees scattered here and there around the roof of their building, insulating the knots of people crowded around waiting for the fireworks to start. Even the little wispy hairs escaping Lan Zhan's braid barely move. Not unless he wants to lean out further, let the metal railing dig harder into his ribs.

The little bit of pain feels good. Grounding. He thinks otherwise he might just float away - out over the skyscrapers, past Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and the wide curve of New Jersey, and into the open sea.

"A-Zhan!"

The wind nearly whips the name away. It takes so much effort to turn - to look back towards the rooftop and the broad-shouldered figure making its way toward him. Mingjue. And - he can't

remember the name - Mingjue's brother. The boy who'd slept in Lan Zhan's bed.

Mingjue's big arms come around Lan Zhan. He's being hugged. He manages to get one hand up to stiffly pat at Mingjue's back before Mingjue pulls away, his hands gripping Lan Zhan's biceps. "Hey," he says. "I heard about the mold thing - *fuck,* that sucks. Did you guys figure out how to fix everything?"

After Meng Yao had dropped the results of his investigation, Lan Zhan and Lan Huan had called their uncle, who had called Yunshen's general manager. Wen Qing and one of her assistants had set up camp in ORCHiD's studio, everyone crouched around the drafting table and its tall metal chairs, performing triage until the people in China couldn't stifle their yawns anymore. Around four pm Wen Qing's assistant sent a summary of everything that had happened and their proposed course of action to Paul and Brian. No response yet.

"Not yet," Lan Zhan manages. It's past eight now, and the 4th of July firework show is imminent. On the other side of the world, China is waking back up. "The team at Yunshen will assess the production floors and the storage areas this morning. We should have an update by office hours tomorrow."

"Do they know what caused it?" Mingjue asks. His brother's attention is mostly on his phone, seemingly unbothered that he hasn't been introduced yet.

"Yunshen's manager thinks the roof leaks," Lan Zhan admits. A red plastic cup dangles from Mingjue's brother's hand, distracting. Lan Zhan hasn't had anything to drink yet. There's wine, he knows. A box of craft beer, for Mingjue. Snacks from the deli on the corner, probably. Lan Huan is down in their apartment, doing something about food - Lan Zhan isn't sure what. Lan Huan left again as soon as they came home from work, and they haven't spoken since. "The roof is very old, and it's been a bad start to the rainy season."

Mingjue nods. He tilts his cap back far enough to itch at his hairline. "I heard, yeah," he says. "Supposed to be a typhoon next week. I've got a couple factories in Ningbo that want to push out

their deliveries because of it."

That had come up on the call too. Lan Zhan's uncle had sniffed dismissively at any suggestions that Yunshen might need to close. It's rare for a typhoon to make land that far north, although it does happen. Lan Zhan remembers, vaguely, a storm in Shanghai that was so strong it broke the windows of their apartment building, but he'd been so young that that's all he remembers about it: the sound of the glass shattering, the wind rushing in, world-ending - and then nothing. Just a moment, and not the before or after of it. "Hmm," Lan Zhan says, in lieu of a real response.

Mingjue looks at him for a moment, and doesn't say anything. His expression is - more intense than is warranted. Does he know something else, about the moldy items? About JLT? Mingjue's big hand comes up and grips Lan Zhan's arm - but then he steps away, leaving Lan Zhan's anxiety trapped in his throat, his questions unasked.

"This is my brother," Mingjue says, and loops an arm around his brother's neck, yanking him forward into the circle. "Huaisang."

"Kevin," Huaisang says firmly, and follows it up with a "Nice to meet you," in English, though Mingjue and Lan Zhan had been speaking Chinese. He offers a soft hand for Lan Zhan to shake, and then for a moment they stand there looking at each other, not saying anything, Mingjue poised between them with a big grin on his face. Across the roof, clear laughter rings out from one of the other groups waiting to see the fireworks. The tinny beat of music on someone's laptop speakers, too faint to follow along with the lyrics. The clink of drinks being toasted. The shiver of Lan Zhan's own heartbeat, as quiet as the traffic so far below them.

"Yes!" Mingjue says, after a beat just long enough to be awkward. "Two of my favorite people, finally in the same place." He laughs, and thumps his brother on the back so hard that Huai - that *Kevin* stumbles forward, lets out a complaining *"Ge."* So he does speak Chinese, at least a little. "I was starting to think you were avoiding me, A-Zhan," Mingjue says.

"Mmm," Lan Zhan says. "No?" He can't think of when he last saw

Mingjue for more than a few minutes. When they went to Queens together, probably. Months ago. No - when Mingjue had held him in the bathroom, after Lan Zhan's nightmare. But they hadn't really talked that night. Mingjue had asked if he was okay and Lan Zhan hadn't answered and that had been that. Lan Huan has been going to Mingjue's apartment since then, instead of the other way. "I'm sorry I haven't been around," he says in English, in deference to Kevin. He means it.

"Don't worry about it," Mingjue says. He laughs. "Xiao-Huan told me you've been busy."

Kevin snorts. When Lan Zhan looks at him he's already lifting the red cup to his mouth, hiding his expression behind it. "Sorry we missed each other on Pride," Kevin says to Lan Zhan. "Guess you had a good time somewhere else though."

The pain that washes through Lan Zhan shouldn't come as a surprise, but it does: the sharp squeeze of it through his chest and arms. He makes fists at his side instead of reaching into his pockets and digging out his phone, to punish himself or beg forgiveness. What is Wei Ying doing, right now? Will he watch the fireworks? Is he still angry? Is he thinking of Lan Zhan at all?

"Pride was fine," Lan Zhan says.

"Cool," Kevin says. He takes another sip of his drink. "Well. I'm gonna go, I'm supposed to meet some friends over in LES soon -"

"Nope," Mingjue says, reeling Kevin back into the circle with his neck in the crook of Mingjue's arm. "Nope, you're staying at least until the fireworks start, I have a surprise planned."

"I hate surprises," Kevin complains, prying at his brother. Lan Zhan grimaces, and over the densely tattooed skin of Mingjue's forearm they manage to share a moment of commiseration.

Mingjue, oblivious, says, "No one hates surprises," and tightens his grip. They tussle together for a few minutes, making elliptical steps around their staked-out patch of rooftop. It makes something in Lan Zhan's chest twist a little tighter to watch them. The way Kevin

flops theatrically around until he can manage to get himself loose. The way they laugh at each other.

“Come *on,* ge,” Kevin whines, when he finally gets free. Most of his drink splashed onto the ground as they played around, and he stares sadly down the puddle. “I’m practically still hungover from Pride, you should be nicer to me. Look at what you did to my drink! If you want me to stay then I need another one immediately. Where’s your rich boyfriend with all the drinks, huh?”

Mingjue laughs. “In the apartment for a few more minutes, I hope,” he says, and laughs again when Lan Zhan and Kevin both frown at him. “Sorry! Sorry, I’m -”

Kevin arches an eyebrow. He aims it towards Lan Zhan, having apparently decided that they’re a team against older brothers. “Just excited,” Mingjue finishes. “Okay - before Xiao-Huan gets up here, I wanted to. Hah! I wanted to get you guys in on the surprise.”

“I hate surprises too,” Lan Zhan informs him, and Mingjue laughs even harder.

“You’ll like this one,” he says. “I think. I hope!”

Mingjue digs into the pocket of his jeans. He glances up at Lan Zhan as he does it, very quickly, and then away - looking out over the rooftop and the water and the city below their feet. His mouth twists beneath his mustache in a way that Lan Zhan doesn’t know how to read. “I thought about waiting until we’re all at Fire Island in a few weeks,” he says, which is the first time Lan Zhan has heard about it, “but Xiao-Huan didn’t know if you were going to be able to make it, A-Zhan, and I really wanted both you and Kevin to be there. Family is important, and you’re Xiao-Huan’s favorite person in the world, and -”

He takes a deep breath. Straightens to his full height, and sets his face in a serious expression. When he opens his hand he’s holding -

Oh.

“Ohhh my god,” Kevin breathes. “Are you fucking *serious?”*

“Yeah,” Mingjue says, steady as a rock. “Tonight I’m gonna ask Xiao-Huan to marry me.”

In his hand is a little velvet box. Lan Zhan reaches out, and Mingjue gives it to him. When Lan Zhan opens it, he sees exactly what he was expecting to see, which is: a gold ring. A pair of inset diamonds on it. The width is sturdy, the box heavy with the weight of what it carries. It’s beautiful. Lan Huan will think it’s beautiful. Lan Huan will love it.

The smile on Kevin’s face is big and genuine, and he practically climbs his brother to hug him. Lan Zhan stares at the box and the ring and its little velvet pillow instead of looking at them, his brain chasing itself around in circles of: *oh. Oh.* ***Oh.***

This morning the world had drawn itself down into a single point of light. Now, he feels as if he’s expanding, stiffening, rooted to the concrete tiles beneath his feet, everything in him spilling outwards - as if he’d taken that leap off the roof anyway, and his body wasn’t smart enough to realize it was falling.

In the end, the words come more easily than Lan Zhan would have thought. But even that is probably just a failure of imagination. He’s kept them pinned beneath his tongue for years, after all.

He says, “Please don’t.”

He holds out the ring box.

He says, “My brother is cheating on you.”

Mingjue and Kevin both freeze. It’s almost funny, how literally it happens. Kevin had pushed a hand under Mingjue’s cap and grabbed a fistful of his hair. Mingjue had a grip on the back of his brother’s shirt. They look at Lan Zhan with identical expressions, which sink so slowly that it seems unreal. Everything seems unreal. Lan Zhan’s hand shakes, still holding the ring box out for someone to take.

“He’s,” Mingjue says. His voice is blank. His face is blank. Oh. He takes the ring box from Lan Zhan so stiffly that it’s like his arm

belongs to someone else. “He’s - A-Zhan, he’s - what? What do you mean?”

“I -” Lan Zhan starts to say, and then -

The first firework goes off above their heads. It’s a scream, a clap of sound, and then gold light - shivery and insubstantial as it washes over them. They all jump but no one looks. Not as the rest of the rooftop cheers, not as the second burst goes off: three smaller flowers, all in red. The red bounces off Mingjue’s eyes, the shine of his lower lip as his tongue wets it. When the red fizzles out the darkness is so complete that he can’t see Mingjue’s eyes at all.

“How long?” Mingjue says.

Another firework bursts above their heads.

“The whole time?” Mingjue says.

Kevin’s hand is a fist in Mingjue’s shirt, right over his heart. Plaid. Just a thin, plaid cotton shirt. Available at any mass market retailer, or any mid-tier menswear brand. The grip he’s got distorts the pattern into something unrecognizable, unweavable. Holding his brother back, maybe. Or maybe just holding on.

“I’m sorry,” Lan Zhan says, but the fireworks drown him out. “I’m sorry,” he says again, louder. The spray of light across the rooftop is dizzying. There’s so much he wants to say. Mingjue is as still as a statue, giving nothing - the shape of him unbearable as the sky turns gold, green, blue, white. Anger radiates off him like heat.

“Is it someone I know?” Mingjue says.

Kevin doesn’t say anything at all. His mouth hangs open, staring at Lan Zhan - who remembers that they only just met each other. After all that time, that build up. Wei Ying would say he’d made a hell of a first impression.

“Yes,” Lan Zhan answers, even as his heart flinches away. Mingjue has earned the truth. He should have had it from the start. “Meng Yao.”

“Meng -” Mingjue repeats. The ring box is still in his hand. The tendons on his arm stand out in the bright light, and fade as the fireworks dim. *“Treasure?* The guy from JLT? That guy?”

Lan Zhan says nothing. He doesn’t have to - there’s nothing else to say, because over Mingjue’s shoulder he can see Lan Huan coming out of the elevator, his hands carefully full of take out cartons, a box of craft beer weighing out the bag on his shoulder. Gucci, black canvas, monogram print, vintage. A gift from an ex in Shanghai. Lan Huan usually uses it as a gym bag. His whole body is relaxed, not expecting the blow.

From across the rooftop, Lan Huan glances around, seeking his people in the crowd. And finally, finally looks at Lan Zhan - and at least for a moment, he doesn’t look away.

-

“You shouldn’t tip your head back,” Lan Zhan says.

Lan Huan exhales noisily. The sound is wet and clotted. Loud in the bare space of the exam room, empty except for MDF cabinets, a sturdy exam table, a metal folding chair that Lan Zhan is tucked onto. It’s the same room that Lan Zhan had been shown to, the last two times he visited Urgent Care.

“Don’t talk, either,” Lan Zhan says.

Lan Huan shuts his eyes. Beneath the bloody kitchen towel, Lan Zhan can see his lip curl. It’s a pity. Lan Huan had bought the towel as part of a set from Fishs Eddy, printed all over with rabbits. Ruined, now. The ice pack will probably need to be thrown away too. Underneath the towel, Lan Huan says something indistinct.

“I can’t understand you,” Lan Zhan says.

Lan Huan peels the towel and the ice pack away from his face. Underneath, the bruises beneath his eye and across his nose have spread into a single, violently colored flower. His jaw works for a moment. He stands, walks over to the cabinets, and spits a dark river of blood into the sink. He stands with his shoulders curled for a moment, and then turns on the tap to wash it away.

“I *said,”* Lan Huan says, still staring down at the sink. “Why did you *do this?* Why, didi?”

Lan Zhan tips his head back. He breathes slowly through his nose. His hands flex on his knees. The metal chair is sold underneath him, grounding. His weight holds him to the ground. Something is growing between his shoulder blades. After everything else that’s happened, it barely hurts. The backs of his arms and hands itch. When he speaks, the words feel like they’re coming from the core of him.

He says, “I’ll go to Yunshen and oversee the repairs on the Resort collection myself. I’ll go to JLT also, and make sure that they’re doing the repairs they’ve promised, and that they don’t interfere with our sales samples for Spring.”

Lan Huan stares at him, open-mouthed. A line of blood runs out of his nose, and he wipes it away with the back of his hand. Lan Zhan meets his gaze evenly. “You don’t believe me,” he says. “But I’ll find the truth anyway. It will be fine, gege. I’ll fix it.”

Lan Huan is quiet for a long moment. The silence on the other side of the door is complete; they hear nothing, no sign that a nurse is coming, no proof that they haven’t been left alone in the building. “When?” he asks.

“The earliest ticket I can buy,” Lan Zhan answers.

“You know there’s a storm coming,” Lan Huan says.

Lan Zhan says nothing. He sits in perfect silence. He arches his back just a little, to feel the caress of the vine as it drips down his spine.

Lan Huan takes a deep breath, holds it. Shakes his head. Spits another clotted ribbon of blood into the sink, and wipes his mouth with a paper towel. “Do what you want, then,” he says.

Notes:

This story is now COMPLETE and the final two chapters are just going through some edits before they'll be posted. Yay!

Also I have been *incredibly stupid* about updating this, but I wanted to share the amazing art that was made for Roots:

Lan Zhan, by Icyfool
"The vines cover Wei Ying like spider webs, like an extension of Lan Zhan’s hand: like he’d reached for Wei Ying in his sleep with every part of himself." - by javi
"You are starting to grow roots, aren't you?" - by syuleya
Wangxian by kiki
Cover art by Bory
An intense Lan Zhan by wwxadhd

Chapter 19

Chapter Text

Two days later, Lan Zhan wakes early. He removes two vines above his hips and a patch of lichen on the underside of his left arm. He dresses the wounds carefully with Second Skin, to keep himself as sanitary as possible while he travels. He packs one carry-on suitcase with light garments in natural fibers, to battle the dense humidity he's sure to find on the other end of the journey. Just enough to get through the first few days. He has clothes stored at the apartment Uncle keeps near Yunshen, for the family to use while at the factory. It's been so long since Lan Zhan has been to Suzhou that he's forgotten what clothes he left behind there, what they look like. The clothes he packs are comfortable, washable. Suitable for grubbing around in a factory, for putting hours in at greasy sewing machines. He assembles a medical kit: non-stick bandages, travel size containers of disinfectant, self-adhesive medical tape in tones that match his skin. Tucks it all into the zipper compartment in the lid of his suitcase, between his socks and underwear.

He lays his favorite traveling look out on the bed while he moisturizes. Relaxed fit trousers from Josh Groot that nip in at the ankle. A plain white tee shirt from Alexander Wang. A white cashmere turtleneck, the softest thing he owns. The jade bracelet, which he always wears when traveling, or on important days. He pulls his hair back into a tidy bun and then stands naked in the center of his room for a long time, staring at the garments laid out, trying to control the way his hands tremble.

He has felt different, the last two days. He has made his choices; now he has to live with them. It's possible to see that as a relief. Wei Ying might say, you can only do your best.

The only noise in the apartment is the bump of his suitcase wheels along the wooden floor. Lan Huan is not there; Lan Huan has not been home for two days. He is staying somewhere else. At a hotel,

most likely. He is answering work emails, but he hasn't come to the office. Neither has Mingjue. Only Lan Zhan, alone in his studio. Wen Qing isn't talking to him beyond curt updates on the investigation at Yunshen, the corrective action plan that JLT has put together to resolve the issues in their portion of the bulk order. When he's encountered her in the break room, she leaves quickly. He's not sure what she knows: about what he did to Wei Ying, or to Lan Huan, or to Mingjue. What JLT and Interwoven have conspired to do to him. He doesn't ask. The way her mouth thins when she has to speak to him says volumes, and anyway all he wants to do is ask if Wei Ying is okay. If he's angry. If he's hurting. If he never wants to speak to Lan Zhan again.

The cab driver asks, "You want music?"

"No thank you," Lan Zhan answers softly.

The drive from Manhattan to JFK Airport is an unlovely ride. They cross the Williamsburg Bridge. Condos gleam from the Brooklyn side, edged in by crumbling brick factories. Traffic is bad going through Williamsburg. He holds his phone between his palms, his eyes closed, his breathing ragged. His arm hurts where he's rubbed the raw wound against his own ribs. The driver keeps the music off and the windows down, and finally, horribly, there is absolutely nothing between Lan Zhan and his thoughts.

His neck itches.

He turns his phone over and over in his hands. His thumbnail scrapes across the buttons along the side. The cab inches forward along the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

He hasn't let himself think much, the last few days - not about anything that isn't mold and unmatched patterns and untrimmed threads. He has instead demanded a flood of information, which came through in meeting notes and shaky videos of phones aimed towards dark factory corners. He's pressed on the bruise Wei Ying left on him but he hasn't let himself examine it. He hasn't had time. He has time now. There's nothing left to do except wait to arrive. He'll sit in this metal can until he gets to the airport, and then he'll shuffle through security, and then he'll sit in a different metal can

for most of a day, and then -

He unlocks his phone. Wei Ying's last text stares up at him, unacknowledged, obsessed over. *I let you around my son.* He locks his phone. Presses the toe of his shoe against his itchy calf. Stares out the window as industrial Brooklyn flows seamlessly into industrial Queens. His leg aches with the effort not to let it shake and twitch. Lan Zhan tips his head back against the worn vinyl seat. His chest hurts. His throat aches. His eyes burn. He'll land in Shanghai in the evening. Yunshen's driver will pick him up from the airport. The trip to Suzhou will be a little under two hours at that time of night. If he can sleep on the plane - if he can sleep -

Humid, oily air streams in from the cab's open windows and over his face, and for once the sensation doesn't feel as if it's happening to someone else.

I let you around my son. What a pitiful way to end things. Lan Zhan's lack of answer could be an answer in itself, but -

But it isn't the answer he wants to make. He doesn't want to end things. If he can fix his company, why not this?

He would regret it, if he didn't at least try.

I want, he types out, and then erases it. Pathetic.

Wei Ying, he says, but then what? You can't solve problems by shouting someone's name. I'm sorry? Please forgive me? Useless. He presses his fingers over his eyelids. The pressure builds and blooms against the back of his eyes. Cowardly. Pathetic.

But worse to say nothing at all. He has been so passive for so long. No. He has to do just do it. Do something. Do *anything.* Anything is better than paralysis.

When he thinks about it that way, the decision is easy.

He's going to have to actually call Wei Ying. It's the only way.

He unlocks his phone. Scrolls again to I let you around my son. Hits send.

It rings and rings. Lan Zhan counts each one. Is Wei Ying in class? With A-Yuan? Maybe he doesn't want to talk to Lan Zhan ever again. Maybe he's sitting in his apartment, watching the phone ring, and then turning away.

When the ringing stops, at first Lan Zhan thinks it's gone to voicemail.

Then, a soft voice says: "Hello?"

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan says. The name tears itself stupidly from his throat. He is undone by a single syllable.

There's silence on the other end of the line. "Hi, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says finally. He sounds tired. "What's up?"

Lan Zhan presses himself back against the seat of the cab and takes a deep breath. "I am sorry that I left," he says. There's a soft sound through the phone: some kind of small, pained vocalization. "I am sorry that I hurt you." There. He said it. He waits for judgement.

When Wei Ying speaks he sounds steady enough. Almost careless. "Oh," he says. "It's cool." He laughs. "It happens."

"I would like to make it up to you," Lan Zhan says. The cab driver looks over his shoulder towards Lan Zhan, and then turns his attention back to the road. Queens flows by the windows, stringy trees and grass sprouting between car dealerships, strung with tinsel. Please, he wants to say. But maybe that would be too much pressure, if he were to beg. To ask for so much. Two minutes ago it didn't matter what he wanted, but - "I am going out of town for a few weeks. For business. But when I come back - may I see you?"

There's another long silence. "Oh, um. No. I mean," Wei Ying says. "No, that's okay."

Oh.

Well.

That's fair.

He probably should have expected that. And he should - he should respect it. He should say something. That he understands. That he wishes Wei Ying the best. That Wei Ying can hurt him back, if he'd like to.

"Why?" is what he says instead.

There's a crackling noise, as if Wei Ying has exhaled hard into the microphone. "Lan Zhan …"

Lan Zhan waits. The cab climbs an overpass. Ahead, there's a sign for the airport exit, coming up soon.

"Look," Wei Ying says. "I made a mistake, okay? I - I rushed into all this, all of you, this, whatever all this is. I'm trying - I mean, look, *I* let you around my son. I was the one who did that, that's on me. But I have to do better, for him. I don't have the space to wait around for someone who doesn't - who isn't on that wavelength. I'm sorry. I mean - I'm free *now,* you could come meet me today if you actually want to talk this out but like … sit around for a few weeks in the hope you actually give a shit? I don't know. That's a lot to ask."

Lan Zhan swallows. "I'm on my way to the airport," he says.

The silence is thick on the other end of the phone. "What, like - right now?" Wei Ying asks. "Literally right now?"

"Yes," Lan Zhan says. "I'm in a cab going to JFK."

"Ah," Wei Ying says after a moment. "Oh well. Good luck, and all that."

A soft sound escapes Lan Zhan's throat. He presses his knuckles against his lips, hoping that Wei Ying hadn't heard it. "Meet me there," he says. Oh, it hurts to speak. Even just to say the words makes his face ache.

This time the silence feels disbelieving. "At the airport?"

"Yes," Lan Zhan says. "If I send a cab for you, how long would it take?"

“Uhm,” Wei Ying says doubtfully. “I’m at home right now. Like twenty minutes?”

“Okay,” Lan Zhan says. “Do you need time to get ready?”

“I don’t wanna go to the airport,” Wei Ying says. “That’s crazy. The airport is - it’s the *airport,* Lan Zhan.”

“I’ll pay for you to get home too,” Lan Zhan says. He’s begging now. More signs for JFK flow over his head. Traffic begins to sort itself into cabs and everyone else. How much time does he have before they arrive? He can’t see the driver’s GPS from where he’s sitting. He says, “Please.”

“Why did you leave?” Wei Ying asks, very softly.

Lan Zhan presses his fingers into the base of his throat, right where his trachea gives way to bone. “I -” But that’s it, that’s all that comes out. He tries again, and manages, “Please come meet me.”

“Why?” Wei Ying asks again, but it doesn’t sound like a question this time. It sounds - oh, it sounds painful. He’s hurting. Lan Zhan hurt him. “Lan Zhan, we - we went on a couple dates. That’s it. You don’t have to -” He laughs as if it’s caught in his throat. “We don’t *know* each other. I thought that you - I don’t know what I thought. I guess I didn’t really know anything about you. I really thought there was something here but I guess not. I guess it was just another dumb mistake. But hey, it’s ah - whatever, you know? It’s no big deal.”

It’s horrible not being able to see Wei Ying’s face. Lan Zhan has never seen him cry. Never seen him angry, not really. He wants to see it. The thought is excruciating, all-consuming. He doesn’t know Wei Ying either, not really. They’ve been prowling on the edges of each other since they met, and the only time Lan Zhan ever actually allowed Wei Ying close was when he showed him his back and even then -

Lan Zhan takes a breath. His eyes stare unseeing out the cab windows. He thinks he might actually throw up. If he lets himself think about it he’ll have to hang up and throw himself out of the

cab and onto the highway. Do it. You want to tell him. It never felt possible before, not in almost thirty years. Do it anyway.

Quietly, so quietly that he barely feels the air leave his lungs, Lan Zhan asks, just to make sure: “Do you want to?”

“What?”

“Know me.”

Wei Ying laughs again and says, “What’s the point?”

Lan Zhan closes his eyes.

For a second he thinks he won’t be able to say anything at all and then Wei Ying will hang up and never speak to him again and he’ll never let another person close ever, ever -

“When I was six,” Lan Zhan says, “my father murdered my mother and then killed himself.” It tumbles out of his mouth, unbearably inelegant. He presses a hand over his eyes, trembling, but it’s not enough to stop him from saying the rest of it: “My brother and I were asleep in the apartment when it happened.”

Wei Ying is silent for a long time, where nothing happens except each of them breathing into the phone line. “What?” Wei Ying says finally. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan replies. He’s shaking all over. He did it. He actually did it. He adds, helplessly, because it’s important that Wei Ying knows: “She fought back. She always fought back.”

“Fuck,” Wei Ying says. The phone crackles again, as if he’d let a heavy breath out directly into the microphone. “Fuck,” he says again. “Well. Shit. Fuck, okay. Wow. Shit. Um.”

Lan Zhan’s breath heaves in his chest. He can’t look. He can’t open his eyes. He says, as steadily as he can, “I want you to know me. I want us to know each other.”

After a moment Wei Ying speaks again. “Well, um. All right. Shit. Twist my arm, I guess. Send a cab for me. You still have my

address. Just - tell me how to find you at the terminal."

-

Twenty minutes is an eternity. There are only two businesses outside of security at this terminal: a bar, and a newsstand with a small coffee bar attached to it. The coffee kiosk is better than nothing. After he makes his purchases, he settles in the least exposed table he can find, which is still open on three sides to the squeak of suitcase wheels, the tread of tired feet. From the corner of his vision he can see people rushing towards security, to hug their loved ones, to leave New York.

He's buzzing all over with adrenaline. His hands shake so hard he puts them under his thighs just to feel less obvious about it. The pressure is comforting - the weight against the hard plastic surface of the chair. The banality of his fingertips falling gently asleep. He *told someone.* He said it out loud, with *words.* He told *Wei Ying.*

Is it enough? Has he just handed Wei Ying a weapon to hurt him with? Should he give Wei Ying *more* weapons? Is there - no, there's nothing new growing on him, no vines, no moss, no lichen, no flowers. He has nothing to offer except the scars that Wei Ying has already seen, and an explanation that would sound even more crazy made in an airport terminal than it would have in Wei Ying's bedroom. He's not crazy. But he can't tell Wei Ying about the plants. But what else can he give? What is good enough?

He resists the urge to stalk Wei Ying's car through the rideshare app.

He resists the urge to rush over to the bar and throw back a shot of whatever liquor they can serve him fastest.

He resists the urge to leave.

He could leave again.

Oh - oh it's hard to breathe.

He *told Wei Ying.* That means someone knows.

His fingers are fully numb now under his legs. It makes his body feel so strange, as he grips his own thighs with hands that can barely feel them. He's an adult. There's no one to punish him for telling a secret, except for himself.

He closes his eyes.

He sits - he listens - he breathes.

He opens his eyes.

Wei Ying slides into the seat next to him.

He doesn't say anything. Just sits and stares at Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan looks away. He has to. He can't say anything if Wei Ying is looking at him like that. It's so much more than he deserves. He can't look at Wei Ying in general; it's too much. He's even more beautiful than Lan Zhan had remembered, or maybe it's the ache in his chest that makes it all the more sweet to look at him. Black jeans with a hole in one knee, degraded by a machine during manufacturing. A red shirt, familiar-looking, with a wide enough neck that Wei Ying's collarbone shows. Lan Zhan feels desperate looking at that sharp wing of bone, the memory of the taste of Wei Ying's skin there. He wonders what Wei Ying sees, when he looks at Lan Zhan.

He's ashamed of how overwhelming it is. He focuses his eyes on the scuffed surface of the table, the coffee stains left by other people. "I'm sorry that I left," Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying blows a long breath out of his nose and looks away. Lan Zhan risks looking at him - only to immediately look down again when Wei Ying's eyes flick back towards him. He stares at their

hands, close together on the table.

“You know that wasn’t a trick question, right?” Wei Ying asks, after a moment. “What I said on the phone. I wasn’t expecting you to like, immediately usher me into the department of your tragic backstory.”

The phrase, and the word he chooses for *department,* are puzzling, like an English joke that Wei Ying didn’t translate well, but Lan Zhan understands the gist: he’s been too much. But when he looks up Wei Ying is studying him closely, so Lan Zhan lets him. Looks back. Announcements are made on the speakers overhead: planes departing, planes arriving. Passenger so-and-so, please come to the customer service desk.

“‘She always fought back’,” Wei Ying quotes. His tone is - strange. Lan Zhan can’t parse it. “That’s a pretty revealing thing to say, Lan Zhan.”

“Is it?” Lan Zhan asks softly. He presses his lips together, breathing slowly through his nose. He says, because he thinks this is important for Wei Ying to know, “You’re the first person I’ve ever told.”

“What?” Wei Ying blurts out. “Ever?”

Lan Zhan nods, still staring down at the table. “What the fuck,” Wei Ying says. “Why not?”

Lan Zhan takes a breath and finds he doesn’t know what to do with it. There’s no explanation, no reason - no moment where he ever sat down and decided not to tell anyone ever. “My family,” he says, and hopes that it’s enough, “doesn’t talk about it.”

He watches Wei Ying shake his head. Rub his hands over his face. Shake his head again. After a moment, Lan Zhan slides the iced coffee across the table towards him, not knowing what else to do. There’s a granola bar too. He lays them in between Wei Ying’s hands like altar offerings. Wei Ying looks at them from between his fingers, and then up at Lan Zhan.

“I’m sorry,” Lan Zhan says again. “Thank you for coming to meet me.”

Wei Ying smiles. It’s reflexive, a little twitchy. His hair is down, a little windswept. His eyes are reddened, the skin beneath them puffy from being rubbed. There are goosebumps on his forearms from the air conditioning. Lan Zhan could look at him forever. “Yeah, well,” he says. “I’m still gonna make you pay for a cab back to Rego Park.”

Lan Zhan nods. He waits. But he’s still surprised when the next thing Wei Ying says is, “Were you abused as a kid?”

Lan Zhan almost bites his tongue. “You,” he says, floundering. “I thought - why do you -” and then gives up.

“Yeah,” Wei Ying says, a little aggressively. His fingertips drum along the sides of the iced coffee, shaking little drops of condensation onto the back of Lan Zhan’s hand. “Why, you thought you were gonna drop a bomb like that and then just move on?”

“I thought you came here to talk about what happened between us,” Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying reveals a row of teeth, uncompromising. “We’ll get there.”

After a moment Lan Zhan shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says honestly. “I don’t remember.”

Wei Ying frowns. “How do you not remember? Did you block it out?”

Lan Zhan looks down at the table. “Maybe,” he says. He’s never talked to anyone about this part either. How strange it is to not know these things about yourself. The things he does remember might as well be dreams. “It would make sense.”

“Does your brother remember?”

Lan Zhan presses his lips together. “I assume so. He was nine at the time. But we,” Lan Zhan stumbles. He closes his eyes. Puts his knuckles against his chest, over his heart. He remembers the shape

of Lan Huan's hand in his hair, on his shoulder. Wrapped tight around his own smaller hand, keeping each other quiet. "We've never talked about it. I remember - certain things. That would not make sense if …"

"If someone wasn't hurting you guys," Wei Ying says. He looks -

Angry, maybe.

Oh. He's still angry at Lan Zhan. That's fair. The past is not an excuse for what Lan Zhan did to him. "I'm sorry," Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying twitches, but he doesn't look at him. "What for?"

"That I left," Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying laughs, pushing his face into his hands. "That's not," he says. "Okay no I *am* still mad about that but I'm also -" He makes an incomprehensible noise into his palms. "That's just, that's really fucked up. Shit. I'm really sorry that happened to you."

"It was a long time ago," Lan Zhan says nervously.

"Weird," Wei Ying says. "Cuz the stuff that happened to me when I was a kid in foster care still kinda fucks me up sometimes. And I actually *have* talked about it, like, with a professional."

Lan Zhan takes a breath, and finds himself without words. Wei Ying meets his eyes evenly, like a challenge. Lan Zhan tries to meet it. But how can he explain what he doesn't understand himself? He doesn't know why the plants grow either; they just do. How can he describe the shame he feels, or the fear? To share one piece of it would mean that the whole horrible structure of himself would come down, and he's felt the cracks in his chest for years.

"My mother," he says, so slowly that the words sound drunk coming out of his mouth, "dreamed of owning a fashion company."

"You told me that before," Wei Ying says. Lan Zhan nods. It's one of the only things he knows about her too. This, also, is part of what he doesn't know: whether she would be proud of him. Whether she would be happy to know that he feels close to her every time he

reaches into a garment rack. That he honors her every time he feeds his work into the sewing machine and watches something beautiful come out the other side.

He can't say all that to Wei Ying. But he thinks some of it must show on his face regardless, because Wei Ying's expression shifts and he says, "Oh. Oh, Lan Zhan. Yeah."

"It is all," Lan Zhan says, "falling apart."

He draws the pattern out for Wei Ying. The overstock inventory. The delayed lead times, the deteriorating quality control at JLT. Lan Huan's questionable relationship to JLT's production planner. Sinking deeper in debt to their parent company. "Mold!" Wei Ying says at one point, outraged. "Those scumbags - you know, when I first showed up at your offices I was like, oh, it's *this* kind of place, but I didn't know it was that bad," he says at another. And, "I don't know, were you really surprised they'd do that?" He drinks the coffee that Lan Zhan bought for him as he listens. He angrily sheds the granola bar and eats pieces out of the wrapper. When he puts his hand back down on the table, the tip of his pinky finger brushes against Lan Zhan's. It feels like hope. It feels like crawling towards something, even as he tears his guts out and arranges them on the stained tabletop for Wei Ying to read.

"This is why I have to go," Lan Zhan explains, finally. "While I can still fix things. We need enough time and liquidity to earn out our contract. We need the product. Without the product, there's no hope. I will get the order finished if I have to sew every garment myself. I won't let them win."

Wei Ying's mouth twists. He makes a thoughtful noise, rolling his eyes up towards the high ceilings, the broad swath of dirty light that cuts through the terminal. "Win," he repeats. "What does win even mean?"

Lan Zhan waits, not sure what Wei Ying is asking. The question is rhetorical, anyway: Wei Ying doesn't pause to let him answer. "What is winning or losing, anyway? I mean, if your goal is to keep going, then shouldn't that be the most important part? Just being able to survive long enough that you get clear of these shitty

people? Fashion brands reinvent themselves all the time, so like - if they did something scummy to your brand image, you can rehab it later. Cancelled orders suck but it'd suck more to lose your company, right? So license out some patterns to these assholes. Buy yourself the time with their money." He shrugs.

Lan Zhan shakes his head, but it's not in negation. He takes a breath, which catches in his throat. "That's what my brother says," he acknowledges slowly. It sounds different, coming from Wei Ying. More professional. Less personal. He can see, for just a second, that there's merit in the idea. But admitting that to Lan Huan … he wouldn't know how to begin. He doesn't know at all what to say to his brother, and that by itself makes him feel hopeless and lost.

Sometimes, in the hazy moments that Lan Zhan is first awake each day, he thinks that maybe Lan Huan is right. Maybe ORCHiD really can't be fixed. Maybe Lan Huan will never speak with him again. Maybe he'd be right to. Maybe he was right when he called Lan Zhan crazy. Maybe it's genetic.

He presses his lips together and closes his eyes. His body contracts around the hurt.

"Hey," Wei Ying says abruptly. He sets his elbows on the table. "Why'd you leave, the other week? How come you didn't text me?"

Lan Zhan tenses all over, can feel it happening, can't do anything to stop it. His eyes fly open. He takes his hands off the table and puts them under his thighs. For a moment they sit there like that: Wei Ying waiting for him to say something, to explain. Lan Zhan counting granola crumbs on the tabletop. Then Wei Ying sighs. Lan Zhan looks up, because he knows he should. Wei Ying is also staring down at the table, his long mouth twisted.

"Look," Wei Ying says slowly. "I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, and stop me if I'm wrong, but I don't think you're very good at feeling big feelings. Right?"

"What gave you that impression?" Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying laughs, startled, as Lan Zhan hoped he would. It's a little

sad sounding, and his eyes shine for just a moment before he blinks and looks away. He says, a little softer, “I have a theory.”

“Please,” Lan Zhan says.

On his side of the little table, Wei Ying is also tense. They stare at the grimy table together, the little crumbs of the granola bar left behind. “My theory is,” Wei Ying says slowly, “You woke up and thought, oh shit. Maybe this really *could* go somewhere. Maybe I’m gonna have to tell this dude about myself and let him see all the gross parts of me too, including all of the awful shit you’re going through with your company. But maybe - *maybe* ... this could be something. Maybe it could be everything. But that’s scary, right? ‘Everything’ is too risky. So if you can’t have everything, it’s gotta be nothing. And so you booked it.” He spreads his hands, laughs again. “What do you think?”

Lan Zhan doesn’t know what expression has settled on his face, if any - but Wei Ying nods, smiles.

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s a good theory, right? Wanna know how I came up with it?”

Lan Zhan nods.

Wei Ying says, “I thought maybe - and I don’t know, I could be projecting here, but I thought - maybe you woke up feeling what *I* was feeling when I went to sleep.”

Lan Zhan opens his mouth, and then closes it. He watches Wei Ying’s spread hands go limp and dangle from his wrists, wondering if he could take one of them between his own. “If I had woken up before you did,” Wei Ying says. His eyes are distant, and he doesn’t see Lan Zhan stiffen further, imagining if Wei Ying had. “I don’t know what I would have done. Well, I mean, it’s *my* apartment. My kid lives there, and he’s got *way* too much stuff to cram into a backpack and flee into the night with. So that’s not really an option. But if I had woken up before you did …”

He huffs a laugh. “Like, sure - Wen Qing makes a bangin’ breakfast on Saturdays and then I usually take A-Yuan to the park so we

could've done the happy little family thing and after you left I'd probably have had a nervous breakdown and deleted your number from my phone and told my agency not to book any more jobs with you or anyone else in the Empire State Building or Midtown in general just in case I like, ran into you in K-town or something, and actually maybe stuffing A-Yuan's favorite toys into a bag and tossing him under my arm before we ran off into the night *would* be a fucking great idea-"

He sighs so deeply that his shoulders rise with it, and fall abruptly. He stares at the table. Lan Zhan stares at it too. There's a weight between them, almost physical, and the weight is the truth: that they *could* be everything to each other. Eventually, Wei Ying sighs again.

He says, "Lan Zhan, you held my hand for like an hour after you fell asleep, and I laid there and thought about upending my whole life so I'd never have to talk to you ever again."

He looks up, finally. His smile is crooked. A little embarrassed. A little hopeful.

Lan Zhan works one of his hands out from under his leg. His fingertips are gently numb as he lays it down on the table between them, palm up. "Why did you agree to meet me, Wei Ying?" he asks.

Wei Ying sneers at him. "Because I *like* you, fool," he says, and then laughs. Drops his head. Admits, "I don't know. I don't know! I'm not good at big feelings either."

Gently, he puts his hand into Lan Zhan's.

"I like you too," Lan Zhan tells him, and laces their fingers together.

"Good," Wei Ying says. "Don't do this shit again. I may be easy but I'm not that nice."

For a moment, it's hard for Lan Zhan to breathe. His elbow presses against the tender, raw skin of his ribs, where only a few hours ago he had dispassionately peeled away the lichen growing there. What

would he have done, if Wei Ying had woken up first? What would *Wei Ying* have done, if Lan Zhan had stayed - waiting for him to wake up with his armful of vines, sluggishly leaking blood and sap? What will he do when he comes back to New York?

Reckless, drunk with truth-telling, promises rise to his lips. “It won’t happen again,” he says, and believes it. “We can go slowly. When I come back to New York, may I take you out on a date?”

“Oh sure, I guess, whatever,” Wei Ying says. “More than one, I hope. But like - you know that slow wasn’t the problem, right? We talked about slow. We *did* slow. Like, comparatively.” He presses his lips together, one long finger itching at the side of his nose. Lan Zhan waits. The feeling of Wei Ying’s palm, soft and warm against his own, makes his whole body feel alive. “You gotta,” Wei Ying says, and exhales hard through his nose. He tries again, determined. “You gotta be honest about, about - about what you’re feeling. What’s going on with you. What you want.”

He looks up and meets Lan Zhan’s eyes. “What do you *want,* Lan Zhan?”

-

Eventually, the alarm on Lan Zhan’s phone goes off, as it must. Wei Ying blinks at it, and makes shocked noises about how long they’ve been talking, as if Lan Zhan didn’t make it a habit to arrive at the airport at least three hours before an international flight, regardless of whether he checks a bag or not.

“You’re already checked in?” Wei Ying asks.

“Of course,” Lan Zhan answers.

“You want me to walk you to security?” Wei Ying asks.

Lan Zhan doesn’t dignify that with a response.

It’s not a long walk. Wei Ying’s boots slap against the tiles, the sound swallowed up by the world rushing back into Lan Zhan’s awareness, the shock of memory that he’s getting on a plane now, that he’s leaving, that he doesn’t know what he’ll find on the other side of the journey. Abruptly it’s imperative that he pull Wei Ying out of the flow of traffic, that he winds his arms around Wei Ying’s waist, that he holds on.

“Oh,” Wei Ying says, soft into Lan Zhan’s ear. “Yeah. I know.”

Lan Zhan’s throat works. His nose is buried in Wei Ying’s hair. He breathes in deep, trying to hold onto the smell of him, the wiry density of Wei Ying in his arms. “I don’t know what to do,” he whispers.

He’s not sure if Wei Ying can hear him over everything else going on around them, but Wei Ying laughs. “Get on a plane, obviously. You’re already here.”

“And then?”

Wei Ying pulls back. Lan Zhan mirrors him, pulls back as well, holds still to let Wei Ying study his face. After a moment, Wei Ying shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says. “But it’s gonna be fine.”

“You don’t know that,” Lan Zhan says, even as his heart jumps even at the possibility, the audacity of a promise like that.

“I do,” Wei Ying says. “I lost everything once. I *know.”*

Lan Zhan’s breath feels thick, clogged with everything he doesn’t know how to put words to, not in any of the languages he knows. Wei Ying’s hand is curled into the low neck of Lan Zhan’s shirt, his knuckles brushing over Lan Zhan’s chest. Can he hear how fast Lan Zhan’s heart is pounding? Does he know how much it hurts?

“How did you get it back?” Lan Zhan asks.

Wei Ying smiles. His voice is very gentle when he says, “You already know I didn’t.”

Lan Zhan’s breathing stops. For a moment everything in him is suspended, weightless. Everything essential held warm in the palm of Wei Ying’s hand. It *hurts* - and then, of course, his breathing starts again, as it must. The body doesn’t know any better, so it does the work for him: the inhalation, the exhalation, the signal to his muscles and nerves to draw Wei Ying tightly against him - and then to let him go.

He steps back, one hand on his suitcase. The other hand tangled with Wei Ying’s, who holds still and lets their arms stretch out into the space between them, never once looking away.

Lan Zhan lifts their joined hands, and presses his lips against the thin skin of Wei Ying’s knuckles. “I will let you know when I land,” he says. And then he walks away.

-

The walk through the airport feels like a dream, unreal. Like Lan Zhan is peering through layers of glass that separate him from the rest of the world. His skin feels raw under his clothes. His chest feels wet with the tears he doesn’t know how to cry. His head is empty, and wonder lives in all the corners of him. He buys a smoothie at the Jamba Juice kiosk. He takes it to the business class lounge to wait for his flight. He sits quietly by the window, and doesn’t look at his work email. He watches planes depart, and planes arrive. His body does all of these things without him. A server comes and leaves a glass of mineral water at his elbow. His back itches. His arms itch. He recognizes the feeling well, but it feels as if it’s happening to someone else.

What does he *want?*

All he has to do is leave, and eventually, he does. Eventually, it's his flight that's called. His ticket being taken. His name being spoken by the gate attendants: "Thank you for flying with us, Mr. Lan." His suitcase bumps down the long, sloping ramp and onto the gateway, and to his seat. As the seats around him fill up he helps two elderly women with their luggage. When he comes back to his own seat, there is another glass of mineral water on the tray. He stares at it for a long time, smelling the soft brininess of it until the air systems start to kick in, and then the cabin smells like nothing of all.

He's seated in the last row of business class, which is a single seat on its own rather than the paired seats through the rest of the cabin. A blessing: the first vines push through his skin halfway through the first meal, as he's bringing a cup of jasmine tea to his lips.

It hurts. More than it usually does. The nerves in his arms and wrist twinge painfully. His back spasms as the skin splits open along his spine. He sets the tea down carefully, but a little sloshes onto the white cloth under his dinner plates, leaving behind a pale stain. Fear licks over his whole body: the first emotion he can identify since he kissed Wei Ying's fingers and walked away. Oh, not now, please. Not now. They're barely an hour into the flight and all the lights are on, the other passengers awake and moving around - anyone could see.

Lan Zhan takes a shivering breath. It's fine. Once he's finished eating, he'll stand up and go to the bathroom. His medical kit is inside his suitcase, in easy reach. No one will see him, or know what's wrong. He slips his shoes back on and -

The airplane shudders. The turbulence is enough to make the dishes on his tray shiver, the porcelain clinking together. There's a moment of silence through the cabin, and then a few awkward chuckles. The takeoff had been bumpy, but once they gained altitude everything has been very quiet. After a moment, the airplane shakes again. The fasten seatbelt light goes on above their heads. Through the open curtains in the galley, he sees the flight attendants take their seats.

The pain comes again, so bright that he gasps with it. The sound is lost under the hum of the engines, the white noise of filter cycling air through the cabins. His skin is burning, in patches all over his back and his arms and in the tender stretch of skin on the inside of his left thigh. Almost as bad as that bright rawness is the faint tickle between his shoulder blades, as two vines there grow longer. He feels them like fingertips sliding slowly over the notches of his ribs, excruciating until he feels another one start to grow, right from the muscle on his shoulder where he carries so much tension.

Not now!

It's as if someone has slipped their fingers under the tendons in his arm and yanked them up towards the roof of the cabin, like an invisible hand is trying to pull him out of his seat. The pain is bright and shocking even though he's done this, this has happened before, he's been hurt before - but not in public, not like this, not -

Lan Zhan sucks air between his teeth, pressing his back against the seat. He curls his hand around the armrest instead of curling it protectively over his chest. He can't even tell if it's the turbulence again or if it's *him* shaking as the muscles and tendons and nerves in his arm seize up.

Even if he was able to get up and hide away in the bathroom, he's not sure if he could walk.

What is *happening* to him?!

He needs to -

Oh -

He needs to -

He closes his eyes tightly. Hides his teeth behind his lips and breathes as slowly as he can through his nose, his chest jerking as the feeling works its way through his whole body. He needs to make this stop. He needs to make it stop before he has a panic attack, or someone sees. He doesn't know what's happening to him but it has to *stop* -

But he can't. He's never gotten it to stop, never figured out a way to stop the plants from growing, and he doesn't know how to do it now. Without another choice, he has to

let it

happen

Behind his closed eyes, he sees - as clearly as if he was looking down at himself - he sees heavy, living vines grow from his arm. He sees its roots surge and thicken as it breaks apart his skin, the muscles beneath thickening and becoming coarse bark. His blood runs over the bark as if it's squeezed out of him, and then it hardens to sap. His hand disappears beneath the vines, which grip and haul their way over the row in front of him, the people sitting there, the stretch of blank cabin wall, leaves hanging from the overhead bins. It happens slowly, *so* slowly - as if hours drip like water in between each blink of his eyes - but his body is too heavy, too stupid to warn anyone before the vines cover them too -

It *hurts* -

And then it passes. Slowly, lingering around the edges of him, dissolving like a drop of ink in a glass of water. When the pain fades he comes back into his body: his pounding heart, his clothes damp with sweat, the weight of his legs as the tension drains out of them. He's shivering all over, his limbs twitching as the aftershocks work their way through his nervous system.

Lan Zhan opens his eyes.

He is the same as he was before. He is himself, in his own body,

ensconced in the plastic shell of his seat, one foot flat on the ground, only half inside his shoe.

Nothing has happened. There are no vines except for the ones already grown, the ones pressed between his spine and the seat back. His hand - curled loose into a ball on top of the arm rest - is whole. There is no tree. No blood. Himself, his own body. The reality of it is staggering, and for once he lets himself sit with that, trembling and exhausted.

He opens his hand. In the center of his palm, a cluster of flowers have grown - small and beautiful, each with green petals that are so pale they almost look white. There's no scent, and no pain. Just flowers, and nothing else.

Chapter 20

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

By the time Lan Zhan drags himself off the airplane, it's nearly 8pm in Shanghai. He has been in transit for nearly twenty hours, including the cab and the time he spent at JFK with Wei Ying. His body thinks it's about seven in the morning. He'd brushed his teeth and combed his hair in the business class bathroom, peering at the red corners of his eyes. In the terminal he can understand almost everything around him. The words being spoken, the signs on the walls and overhead, all untranslate themselves - a relief so complete it leaves his muscles weak.

The plants that grew during the flight are still there, except for the flowers in his palm: there were too many to deal with in an airplane bathroom, when he still had to stagger through Customs and the airport and endure the drive to Suzhou. He hasn't slept.

Mr. Fei is waiting for him in the arrivals hall. He's carrying a sign even though he's been Yunshen's driver since Lan Zhan was a child, which Lan Zhan finds strange until he gets close enough to read it. Instead of his name, the sign says, *WELCOME HOME*. The air outside Pudong Airport is very thick and very still. The flight had been cold and the difference is unsettling, the humidity slowing him as efficiently as a hand to the chest. The route between New York and Shanghai goes north, close to the poles; the typhoon is making its way up from the south. As they walk to the car, the first raindrops start to fall.

-

The drive is long and quiet. Mr. Fei puts on the radio, to a news station that's tracking the progress of the typhoon. Last night it skirted the northern edge of Taiwan, moving just slowly enough that Lan Zhan's flight had been one of the last allowed to depart on schedule. This morning it made landfall in Zhejiang, near Taizhou. Winds around 125 kilometers an hour, and picking up speed as it travels up China's coast. Flooding outside of Ningbo: landslides, crop losses, dramatic rescues as the waters rise.

"They say it'll turn out over the ocean before it reaches us," Mr. Fei says.

"Who does?" Lan Zhan asks, but Mr. Fei only shrugs.

"When will you go to Shanghai?" he asks instead, and then it's Lan Zhan's turn not to say anything.

Lan Zhan sits turned slightly towards the windows so that he doesn't put too much pressure on the living vines underneath his clothes. The expressway to Suzhou is nearly empty. What few other cars are out on the road have a hunted look to them. Below, the edges of Shanghai flow by, turning from glittery towers into dense office parks and then into nothing, or at least nothing that can be seen at night through the splattering rain. During the daytime there were small towns and fields, and maybe there still are, but it's been three years since Lan Zhan has been back to China and the landscape changes quickly.

There were a few moments that he caught himself looking for his old apartment building - even though they'd never lived close to the airport, not anywhere near it - but this is the closest he's been to his old life in four years, and every damp, towering building *could* be his, if only he doesn't look closely enough. There, the glassed-in, crowded balconies; there, the hanging laundry. He watches the sleeves of tee shirts and blouses shudder, as the car passes them by.

The wind will rip everything right off of the wire if it isn't taken in soon.

If he closes his eyes, he might fall asleep. Not even the shift of the plants - the faint lightning shocks as roots brush against his nerves - is enough to cut through how *tired* he is. Even the sound of the radio starts to blur with the sound of the rain, the sound of airplane engines, the beat of his own straining heart. He's come home, but he doesn't get to *be* home. He has a job to do. That has to come first.

He takes out his phone, to do *something,* to keep himself awake. He's been in the US long enough that his phone is American too. Many of the apps he has on it won't work now, but his messages from WeChat have come through just fine, along with his work email. Wei Ying had texted Lan Zhan while he was on the plane, hours after the cab must have dropped him back off at his apartment. He said: *Take care, and be safe. Talk soon.* Lan Huan hasn't texted him at all.

Has Lan Huan gone back to their apartment, now that Lan Zhan is no longer there? He has Lan Zhan's flight itinerary. Isn't he worried? Is he following the progress of the typhoon? Is he checking in with their uncle, at least, to make sure that Lan Zhan arrived safely?

He pulls up Lan Huan's name in WeChat. The last message is from a few weeks ago, something innocuous. Asking Lan Zhan to pick up something on his way home, from that Greek place they both like, the one next to the train. Lan Zhan's thumbs hover over the keyboard. He fixed things with Wei Ying, he thinks. He hopes. Maybe -

His uncle will have another phone for Lan Zhan to use while he's in China. He doesn't need to message Lan Huan now. (Or Mingjue, whose name is still directly below Lan Huan's, because not many people ever talk to Lan Zhan. Not many people have ever wanted to be his friend.) He can wait until they get to the apartment, to let Lan Huan know he landed. If Lan Huan doesn't already know. If Lan Huan doesn't text him first.

His hands linger guiltily over Lan Huan's name anyway. He goes back to Wei Ying's message, writes back *I have landed. I will text you again tomorrow, if that is all right.*

He opens his notes app. He'll start with the uncut fabric. It's been assessed by JLT's team and Yunshen's team but you can't trust anyone. He'll need to know the latest plan for the cut fabric, the partially assembled garments. There's no update in his email, but maybe Yunshen is waiting to review everything in person once Lan Zhan has arrived. Maybe the typhoon has delayed whatever the current plan is. He won't know until he gets to the factory, until he can see for himself what's been done.

Lan Zhan almost asks the driver to take him to Yunshen instead of the family apartment. But the streets are empty and strange, and they've arrived before he realizes that they're even in the right district.

Lan Zhan breathes thinly as he lets himself into the building. The smell is the same, like sour water has been used to wash the floors. He can hear Cantonese pop music somewhere on the ground floor. The elevator groans and creaks its way up to the proper floor. It's fine. Lan Zhan should sleep. He should pull the roots out of his back and go to sleep, before his body remembers that it's nearly 10am in New York, and he should be at work. He should be glad to be alone, to have time to rest before the storm, and everything that will come after.

The apartment is on a lucky floor, in a tall building that was very nice thirty years ago when the unit was purchased. Lan Qiren lives about twenty minutes away, in a building that was very nice eight years ago. He'd held onto his old apartment for family to use, even though Lan Huan and Lan Zhan are the only family left, and Lan Huan usually stays in Hangzhou or Shanghai, in hotels, when he comes to China.

Neither of them like to come to this place.

The lights are on when Lan Zhan opens the door, and a cloud of smoke rushes out to greet him. Inside it smells mostly of cigarettes, and a little bit of incense and over-steeped tea and the plastic that

covers the furniture when no one is staying there. Lan Zhan slips his shoes off, tense and uncertain. “Uncle?” he calls.

After a moment, a voice answers back. “Lao Lan,” it says. “Hello.”

Abruptly, Lan Zhan is awake.

His suitcase clatters over the tile. The apartment is overly warm, more warm than Lan Qiren keeps it. As he comes out of the little hallway, it feels like all of the lights in the apartment hit him at once. There, sitting at the kitchen table, surrounded by paperwork and cigarette smoke, a laptop at his elbow, is Meng Yao.

There’s a moment of silence, where the two of them stare at each other across the thin space. The only sound in the apartment is rain lashing against the windows.

“Lao Lan,” Meng Yao says. He taps his cigarette against the ashtray. “Welcome back to Suzhou. I’m glad you arrived safely. Lan-zongjingli was very worried about your flight. He asked me to apologize that he couldn’t be here when you arrived, but he was concerned about driving in the rain.”

“What are you doing here?” Lan Zhan asks.

Meng Yao blinks at him slowly. His eyes are clear dark pools in the harsh light of the kitchen. “I came to assist in the fabric inspection,” Meng Yao says.

Lan Zhan’s fingers flex painfully around the handle of his suitcase. Meng Yao’s eyes flicker down, following the motion. “Did you hurt your hand?” he asks, gesturing with his cigarette towards the bandages wrapped around Lan Zhan’s palm.

“No,” Lan Zhan says.

“Ah,” Meng Yao says. "You're bleeding, though."

When Lan Zhan doesn’t say anything to that, he leans forward, pushing a little silver phone across the table. *Lan Qiren’s* table. Lan Zhan ate most of his meals at this table, growing up. All of the childhood he can remember was lived at this apartment, and here is

Meng Yao - small-shouldered, bright-eyed, cancerous little Meng Yao, sitting calmly in the only home Lan Zhan has left on this side of the world. He hadn't even wanted to *come here,* and now he's ragefully territorial about the place. Oblivious, Meng Yao says, pointing his chin at the phone, "Lan-zongjingli asked if you would please call him when you arrived."

Lan Zhan leaves the phone where it is. "Why?" he says again.

Meng Yao doesn't look away from Lan Zhan's face. "Why does Lan-zongjingli want you to call him?"

"Why are you interfering with my fabric," Lan Zhan says, each word evenly spaced between his teeth.

After a second, Meng Yao smiles. "Why are you making trouble for me, Lao Lan?" he asks. "It's my job to help you."

"Is it?" Lan Zhan asks. He still hasn't sat down. Hasn't unbent from how he'd entered the apartment: his back rigid, tucked tight to keep from swaying under the weight of what's growing there.

The smile doesn't waver. If anything, it grows by millimeters. This is, strangely, the first time they've been alone in a room together. Before there was always Yinzhu and Jinzhu, or one of the executives from Interwoven, or Lan Huan. They don't know each other at all. Or at least, Lan Zhan knows nothing about Meng Yao.

"You must be tired from the flight," Meng Yao says. "You should get some rest. I have a little more work to do before I can go to sleep myself. The typhoon missed Hangzhou completely, so," his dimples deepen as he gives a deprecating little laugh. "JLT will be open tomorrow, and there *is* still quite a lot to do to get your products repaired."

Lan Zhan stares at him, angrier and angrier. He's so tired that he can no longer tell what's a threat and what isn't. "Did my brother say that you could stay here?" he demands.

Meng Yao rests his chin on his knuckles. The motion of it loosens ashes from his cigarette, which drift down towards the table. There

are little gray smudges all over the paperwork around him, evidence of how long he's been working there. "No," he says. "Lan-zongjingli was kind enough to offer your family's apartment so that I wouldn't have to risk driving back to Hangzhou during the storm. Did he not tell you?"

Lan Qiren had not. There had been no email, no message. The handle of Lan Zhan's suitcase creaks underneath his grip. When he inhales through his nose all he can smell is cigarette smoke. He might as well be in a cheap hotel. "In the morning you will leave," Lan Zhan says. "You aren't wanted here."

Meng Yao's mouth presses tight for just a moment before the smile returns. "Lao Lan," he says. "Please. We are both professional men. Surely we can find a way to work together for the next few days."

Lan Zhan takes the cigarette from between Meng Yao's lips and stubs it out in the ashtray in the center of the table. "You've done enough," he says, and then says again, "You're not wanted here."

For a moment Meng Yao's mouth hangs open around the space where his cigarette no longer is. And then, strangely, he laughs. He moves the hand that he'd been smoking with under his chin, so that his pinkies are pressed together. His eyes are big and dewy as he blinks up at Lan Zhan, perfectly innocent. Lan Zhan remembers when he'd first met Meng Yao, he assumed the man wore the kind of fashionable contacts that made your eyes look like that. He remembers pitying Meng Yao too, defending him years ago, the first time Lan Huan got an American boyfriend, and the second.

"I've done enough," Meng Yao repeats. "Your brother *did* mention that you had some theories about how the fabric got damaged. Why don't you tell me all about what you think happened?"

Lan Zhan's teeth grind together. He'd wondered if Lan Huan would tell Meng Yao exactly what Lan Zhan had accused both of them of, but it still hurts to discover he had. Strangely, Lan Zhan feels almost embarrassed, as if he'd done something childish in front of his elders. Meng Yao stares at him, open and friendly looking, waiting for Lan Zhan to say to his face: "You have sabotaged us." Or, "We would never have been put in this position if we hadn't been forced

to use your useless factory." Or, "Was ORCHiD not dying fast enough for Interwoven that they brought you into it too?"

What Lan Zhan says instead is, "How could you do this to my brother?"

Meng Yao jerks back in his seat, just a little. It's not what he's expecting, and Lan Zhan feels a vicious little thrill of satisfaction. But Meng Yao's face is blank with confusion instead of guilt. "Why would I hurt your brother?" he says, and shakes his head. "Why would I risk *my job* to hurt your brother?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Lan Zhan says. "If it was your job to do so."

"What was my job?" Meng Yao asks. "What did I do?"

Lan Zhan says nothing.

"Was I the one who put the hole in Yunshen's roof?" Meng Yao asks.

Lan Zhan says nothing.

"Was I the one who neglected to have Yunshen's facilities inspected for nearly a decade?" Meng Yao asks. His voice gets sweeter with each question. "Am I the one who would be opening Yunshen tomorrow, if the local government hadn't announced penalties for anyone who resumes work during the typhoon?"

"You didn't *fix anything,"* Lan Zhan says, outraged. "All of the instructions we gave you on the spec sheets, all of the quality notes. The prototype samples have the same problems that the bulk production has."

"Did they?" Meng Yao asks. "Or did three samples out of a hundred and twenty five have poorly matched patterns, two samples had grease marks from a single uncleaned sewing machine, and then a further eight untrimmed threads were found? When Lao Wen booked the inspection, she asked for a tightened AQL. 1.0/1.5 instead of the normal 2.5/4.0. Your garments have an enormous amount of handwork, you know - it's not reasonable to apply a level of inspection that's normally used for machine-made products. We

would have passed inspection under the usual way, but Wen Qing's instructions meant we were allowed fewer small defects. Of course the inspections failed. But the rework of all of *our* garments is almost complete by now, you know. I issued improved work instructions to the production floor, and assigned two additional workers to QC the garments as they came off the line. This is of course before we bring the third party inspector back, at JLT's expense. We have three inspectors booked to arrive in two days at JLT to perform the finished product inspection, which I am fully confident we'll pass. And I think you would be too, if you had spoken to Lao Wen or your brother about the plan they both signed off on."

This time the point goes to Meng Yao, and strikes true. Lan Zhan's chest tightens so fast that he has to press a hand against his stomach to force himself to breathe. He can't admit to Meng Yao that Lan Huan isn't speaking to him, and so he says nothing, but it *hurts* - even just to remember it himself.

Meng Yao, smelling blood, twists the knife in a little further. "If it matters," he says, "I told your brother not to lie to you. Why bother? It wouldn't have been hard to find out how bad your books were. He should have just told you what was happening last year, instead of letting you make things worse. Now here you are, in the middle of a typhoon. And for what purpose? The damaged fabric had already been arranged for even before your plane left New York. There's nothing here for you to do."

"I can find out the truth," Lan Zhan says, and Meng Yao laughs.

"There's no conspiracy," he says. "Just business. *That's* the truth, Lao Lan. And if anybody has hurt your brother, it's you."

"Shut up," Lan Zhan says, but it's not nearly loud enough, not nearly the firm denial it should be. His throat is too tight, too dry. He feels parched all over. Even the over-steeped tea at Meng Yao's elbow looks like a lifeline.

After a moment, Meng Yao looks away. He rubs his fingers over his eyes with one hand - it's nearly midnight now, and the silence stretches thin and tired between them. He picks his packet of

cigarettes off the table. Camels, and probably counterfeit. Just acrid, cheap Chinese tobacco packed into each paper tube. The click of his lighter is very loud, even against the rain. He blows fresh cigarette smoke out of his nostrils, and it burns Lan Zhan's lungs.

"I am being very generous with you, Lao Lan," Meng Yao says. "I think that you know Interwoven doesn't treat its vendors any better than the companies it buys. JLT is lucky to make 3% profit off of what Interwoven is willing to pay us. When they're *willing* to pay, and don't say that since *they* allowed the retailer to return goods, *we* should credit them the cost of what didn't sell." He shakes his head. "But that's business, isn't it? It's a bad idea to take it personally."

"It isn't *your* life at risk," Lan Zhan says. This, at least, feels like steadier ground - but only for a moment, before Meng Yao's smile returns.

"Oh," he says. "So you'll die if ORCHiD goes out of business?"

Lan Zhan stares at him, his mouth a flat line.

"You'll lose all of your money and be homeless?" Meng Yao asks.

"Don't make stupid comparisons," Lan Zhan tells him.

Meng Yao laughs. "My apologies, my apologies," he says, overly formal. "You're right, how stupid of me. It's none of my business. You're right. I must be more tired than I thought, Lao Lan. I think I'll go to bed. There's nothing else we need to discuss tonight. In the morning, if it's not raining too badly, you and I can walk over to Yunshen and I'll take you through everything that's been done for your fabric." He gestures with his cigarette towards a lump of keys sitting next to his laptop. "Lan-zongjingli left a set of Yunshen's keys for you, in case it was safe to go tomorrow. The uncut fabric and the finished garments came back from the cleaners yesterday. Everything's being held in the shipping area. Once we're able, a third party inspection has been arranged to look everything over, and cut swatches to be sent for laboratory testing, to verify that no mold remains. All at JLT's expense, by the way. A special favor in recognition of the close relationship between our two companies."

“You said not to make it personal,” Lan Zhan says. Meng Yao’s mouth flattens, before he visibly wrestles himself back to neutrality.

“I -” Meng Yao says, but Lan Zhan interrupts him.

“Even if it’s business,” he says, “it should be better. You may be willing to be treated as if you’re something disposable, but I’m not. That’s why I’m here. That’s why ORCHiD will survive. I will make sure it does.”

There, finally: real anger in Meng Yao’s eyes. Smoke drifts from between his teeth. It catches the spark of satisfaction in Lan Zhan’s chest, lighting him up for just a moment before exhaustion closes back in. It’s a long time before Meng Yao can fight past his own anger, a long moment where Lan Zhan sways on his feet, and listens to the rain get louder and louder. The sound of it catches Meng Yao’s attention too, and the next time he exhales smoke he manages to speak, quietly - his words very even.

“You know, Lao Lan,” he says, “I’d be very surprised if Yunshen hadn’t had problems before this. My contractor found evidence of several poorly repaired leaks in the roof, dating back at least a decade. He thinks the entire roof will need to be replaced soon.”

Meng Yao’s gaze flicks away from Lan Zhan, to the windows and the rain. “It *has* happened before, hasn’t it?” he says, in a tone that’s not really a question. “It was just other people’s products that got moldy.”

“We have nothing else to discuss,” Lan Zhan says. He doesn’t look at Meng Yao. He studies the tabletop instead, the production plans that are printed out and scratched over, the scratches on the table itself that Lan Zhan left there as a child who didn’t know any better. Meng Yao takes a drag from his cigarette. For a second, Lan Zhan is sure that Meng Yao will blow the smoke into his face, but he turns his head at the last moment. The smoke hangs heavy over the table instead, spreading outwards until it disappears entirely.

“Fine” Meng Yao says, and stands up. He leans back over his chair to stub his cigarette out in the ashtray. “If you still think I’m here to sabotage you, you can go inspect the fabric yourself. Just let me

know if I should cancel the inspection bookings, would you? I don't want to have to pay any unnecessary fees."

He disappears into the second bedroom. Even this feels hateful, obsequious: that he'd chosen the smaller bedroom for himself, Lan Zhan's bedroom, the one he'd grown up in - not that there's anything left in there to say so. With nothing else to do, Lan Zhan lets himself into his brother's room. Like the other two rooms in the apartment, it's as anonymous as a hotel room.

He sits down on the bed. He stands up, pulls the plastic cover off and folds it, opens up the closet doors, places it on the shelf that used to be where Lan Huan kept boxes of plastic toys. He drags his suitcase over to the desk, sets it on top. Sits down again. Stands up again. Unzips his suitcase, gets his dopp kit and his medical bag out. He peeks out when he opens the bedroom door, as if Meng Yao will be waiting in the hall. The apartment is silent - except for the rain and the howling wind. He can see Meng Yao's shadow through the frosted glass door of the other bedroom. It doesn't move as Lan Zhan slips into the bathroom.

Lan Zhan sets his dopp kit on the slim counter, next to where two brand new toothbrushes are already sitting inside of a green plastic cup, still wrapped in cheerily printed plastic. He sets his medical kit beside it too. He needs to deal with the plants in his back. He needs to brush his teeth. He needs to sleep. He fumbles a hand behind himself, groping for the lowest vine, just above his hip.

He pulls too hard. The plant doesn't break, but it tears *something,* he's not sure, an old scar or a healing scab, and whatever it is makes pain surge bright and shocking all the way through his body. He jerks forward, catching himself on the edge of the counter, breathing hard. Blood soaks the waist of his pants, flowing hot down his flank. Fine. That might as well happen. He has other clothes here. He has an entire kit full of medical supplies. He can take care of this. He'll pull out the rest of the plants. He'll shower. He'll bandage himself up. He'll clean the blood off the floor. He'll go to sleep. He'll wake up.

He looks up, and meets his own eyes in the mirror.

There's less noise than he would have thought, as his knuckles kiss his face. The mirror cracks wide from side to side and behind it is nothing, just white plastic. It makes hardly any noise at all, and it barely hurts. The hot drip of blood down his fingers is more startling than the sting of broken skin. A shard of glass falls out of the frame and smashes into little pieces on the countertop. In the mirror, he looks the same, except for the translucent smear of blood across his mouth where the glass split, the shudder of a broken line across his cheekbone. The overhead light is harsh and unforgiving but it's good. It's what he needs to see.

He takes the lump of keys off the table. He leaves his phone.

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Suzhou smells strange. It's the first thing Lan Zhan notices, that the rain has washed away the lake smells that usually hang heavy in the streets. For a few steps the rain feels like rain, like a heavy, ordinary summer storm. A few steps after that the solidity of the rain becomes clear, that it's a physical sheet of water sweeping across him, that it burns as it hits his shoulders and his uncovered head. In seconds, he's wet through. The noise is all-consuming - so dense that it's ceased to be drops of water, or wind battering the trees and signs and everything around him, and become only a singular wordless howl.

The radio said that the storm will continue to build. That it will reach its peak in Suzhou in the dark hours of the night and then move on. He's fine. He's wet, and he hurts, but he'll be as safe in Yunshen as he would be sleeping in the apartment, with only a wall separating him from Meng Yao. He doesn't need to sleep. He doesn't even need to see, really. It's only a few blocks to the factory, and his body knows the way.

It takes him several tries to open the padlock that holds the tall gates secure. His fingers slip on the wet metal. His hand is stiff and swollen where he punched the mirror. But after a few minutes he's on the other side of the gate, standing in what feels like an empty gray field. The buildings are lost behind the mist; what little he can see is dark and cold. It feels as though he's the only person in the world, but he's been alone in Yunshen before. There had been months when he'd gone back and lived in the family apartment, had woken early and walked to the factory in no-color darkness, and sewed until his heart was quiet and the world was full of people again.

The metal gate screams as Lan Zhan closes it behind himself.

Yunshen's main doors are metal also, heavy and painted a faded, flaking blue. He staggers across that gray field towards that distant blue, pressing his entire body close to the door as he fumbles too with this lock. When he pushes the doors closed the noise drops away so abruptly that for a second he thinks he's lost his hearing. But no - the rain is still fighting the wind over the broad metal roof, rattling and yanking against every anchored point.

For a long time Lan Zhan can only stand there, swaying tiredly. There is the big signboard, the faded photographs of key employees, the framed business licences and ISO certifications. There are the cracks in the edges of each stair step where the ground has crumbled away. The altar next to the doorway still smells of incense, the pile of plastic-wrapped candy and oranges askew. In the mornings shafts of light cut through the dusty glass and leave chessboard patterns on the floor, but now -

Now, it's so dark. His clothes drip water onto the tile. The only light comes from the little red electric candles on the altar. His hair has come mostly out of its braid, and is plastered in wet hanks all over his face. His plants, too, feel sodden and limp underneath his shirt, the skin around them sore and abused. His hand drips blood. When he looks down, he sees that his pant leg is soaked with blood as well, and blotchy with rainwater - like watercolor spreading across a wet page. He's shivering. When he steps further into the entryway, his foot drags on the ground. He can't stop shivering. He's so *cold.* The rain hadn't been cold - not even the wind had felt

cold, it hadn't felt like anything at all except hundreds of hands battering at him, shoving him backwards and forwards - but now he's freezing, his muscles locking up, his whole body shaking. What a pitiful sight Lan Zhan would be if anyone was there to see him: wet and cold and bloody and alone.

His head creaks on his neck. To his right is the shipping floor, where incoming materials and outgoing products are held. Somewhere in the dim shadows, he can hear water sluicing down somewhere inside: splattering against the concrete floor, muted where it's hitting bolts of fabric, or sewing machines, or piles of packed boxes, full of garments ready to ship. His fabric is there too. As his eyes start to adjust he can start to see it: endless yards of tarp laid out on the concrete floor, silk and tulle and linen and nylon spread out across it. Washed by the fabric vendor and returned, hopefully free of mold but there's no way to tell except with expensive laboratory testing. Even then the spores might still live in some portions of the fabric and not others, so it's possible to cut from a piece that just hasn't been infected yet. And even then, laboratory testing takes - what, a week to get the report? Two weeks after that to cut and sew the products, if they get a passing result.

Even if Meng Yao is right - if JLT's reworked goods pass inspection - half the Resort collection will leave China a month later than the rest of it. ORCHiD misses its ship window. Retailers cancel their orders. Interwoven takes everything.

There's a strange sound echoing through the cold space, almost unnoticeable underneath the rising wind, the rain, the shuddering corrugated roof. It takes him a long time to realize that the ugly, thin noise is coming from him: not until he presses his fingers against his throat and feels the vibrations there.

He should look anyway. The lights are probably safe to turn on, he thinks. He should go and look for himself. He should - he should do something. That's why he came all this way, to make things right. But that's always been the problem, hasn't it? That he didn't see the damage until it was too late to fix. He already knew that the roof leaked. The roof leaked even when they were kids.

The ugly noise becomes a ragged sob. He wants Lan Huan. He wants his brother. He's so alone. He's never been this alone before, not ever. It takes a long time to strangle the sob, and even when he's quiet again he can feel the jagged edges of each breath.

Lan Zhan turns away from the wide open door, his ruined fabric, the silent shipping floor. His feet drag across the tile, towards the wide concrete stairs that lead to the upper floor. Adjacent to the shipping areas are the production lines, the factory itself shaped like a big English L. Only the top part of the letter is two stories, instead of one cavernous warehouse that makes up the base. On the second floor are offices, a small conference room, a smaller showroom where his designs have held a point of pride for more than a decade. It takes him a long time to climb the concrete stairs. He leaves red handprints on the railing and the wall. For each step he has to first move a mountain, and he's so tired. He hasn't slept in at least a full day. He's barely slept in months. His body thinks it's afternoon, and that it weighs more than one person could ever possibly lift. When he reaches the top of the stairs his ankle twists and he falls, sprawling across the concrete landing. One last indignity.

Lan Zhan gets back up. He doesn't know any other way.

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Lan Zhan's old office sits neatly in the crook of the building, the second door on the second floor. Windows run along the entire exterior wall, so here the noise is almost as overwhelming as it had been when he was outside, struggling through the rain. The glass is thick, a relic from before the Cultural Revolution, and on sunny days the panes always look smeared, as if the dust of a century had somehow gotten trapped inside it. Here, now, they're dark and

splattered with rain, as the typhoon tries to force its way inside. He staggers to them, looks outside, and sees nothing. The tree that stands in the courtyard below is invisible in the storm, or maybe it's gone: torn out by the roots and tossed somewhere unimportant.

He has made so many mistakes.

He stands at the window, gasping for breath, and thinks that over and over: he has made so many mistakes. He shouldn't have come to Yunshen. It isn't safe. But the wind is getting stronger, the rain more black, more punishing - is it worse to try and go back? Would he be giving up? Or is he just being a fool?

He doesn't know anymore. He's lost. Nothing makes sense anymore. Even the idea that the typhoon will pass seems foreign, unimaginable. All he can do is stand there stupidly, in front of a window that's shaking as hard as the other side of Yunshen's roof is shaking, a violence at the very edge of visibility, which he'd mistaken at first for the rain itself. The motion of it is fascinating, the way a predator is fascinating: the knowledge that someone is about to hurt you, and they're going to take their time with it. He stares at the shuddering metal until the motion of it blurs into nothingness, until the edges of the world are lost to the storm.

He wants -

He doesn't have the vocabulary to describe what he wants, or maybe he's beyond just speech, beyond anything but that gnawing, consuming wanting, as wordless as the storm itself. He *wants:* a sentence in and of itself. He has been wanting and not getting for longer than he can remember, and he can no longer remember what it felt like when he had it.

Lan Zhan turns and stumbles away from the windows. It's practical, safer - he knows this, dimly - but it doesn't seem to matter. What he wants is just not at the window. What he wants is in the closet. He clicks on the desk lamp as he passes it, opens the closet door, and drops to his knees, searching for safety in its depths.

In the back of the little closet is a box with many labels written on it. Red and black characters march up and down the side of the

carton, marking its contents as SPRING 98 and DO NOT THROW AWAY and PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT. Lan Zhan had found it while he was in college, clearing out the second office on the second floor, which had gone unused for fourteen years. He'd recognized what the box really held the moment he opened it, and when he took it to Lan Huan he'd known instantly as well. They've never asked their uncle about where the box came from: whether he was the one who had packed it and then buried it under factory detritus. Instead, the two of them closed themselves away in Lan Huan's room, carefully examining each artifact to try and puzzle over its meaning. And then they'd brought it back to Yunshen and re-buried it.

Over the years, Lan Zhan has come back to this box over and over, to look through it and steal little keepsakes - only one or two at a time, just small things like a jade bracelet, or a carved wooden rabbit, or a worn tape measure - agonizingly conscious of its contents as a finite treasure. That's what it is, after all: everything they have left of their mother, held close in a box no larger than the legal file boxes Lan Zhan uses to keep his sketchbooks in.

Mostly, that's what she left behind. Half of the box is a dense stack of sketchbooks, the same kind of onion skin tracing paper that Lan Zhan uses himself, the pages cluttered with sketches that never went anywhere, never were prototyped, that never saw life. He reaches for them - sees the blood and water on his hands - shrinks away. Wipes his hands on his white cashmere sweater, finds it also soaked through, and peels it off without thinking. The tee shirt underneath goes with it, leaving him bare-chested, bare-backed, tucking his big frame as close inside the closet as he could get - the way he used to hide right here, just like this, when he was much smaller, curled in among the bundles of fabric and waiting for his mother to find him.

The building shudders around him, but here Lan Zhan is safe. The hems of plastic-wrapped samples brush against the wet crown of his head. His hands are dry enough now, and free of blood: his split knuckles have clotted over, the edges of the wounds curling and red. He picks up a sketchbook, balancing it carefully against the corner of the box so that he won't get it wet. Even with that

caution, he only touches the very edges of the pages, revenant. What's inside was nothing special, but it was hers: lingerie patterned with roses, dresses illustrated with embroidered peonies, lotus flowers stretching their long necks up towards the sun. His fingertips trace the edges of her petals.

In the river of his memories he has brought himself over and over to these pages, trying to find the person his mother had been. What she had been like, what made her laugh, if she had loved her sons. Each time her art looks different, since he has brought a different self to see them. But even that is the process: to sketch out hundreds of different versions of yourself, ruthlessly whittling down the ones that don't fit.

Would she recognize the man he's brought to her today?

Would she listen if he said that he'd tried, over and over, to do good by her, to make her proud? To be successful? To be enough?

The brush of plastic-wrapped dresses against his hair feels like the touch of a hand, gentle enough that it tears something loose in him and sets it growing. He brushes a hand over his face - uselessly, because his face is only wet from the rain. A gesture borrowed from other people, who are better at *being people* than he ever has been.

But then he remembers - he knows - or rather, he was told once - at Lan Zhan's college graduation, giddy with pride and drunk on sweet champagne, Lan Huan said, "She loved that you were an artist, right from the start. She said you inherited her eye."

Lan Zhan sags gently against the doorframe of the closet, letting go by millimeters. His bare shoulder kisses the old wood. His eyes are so heavy. Everything is so heavy. The wood is wet and swollen from the rain.

It always used to be like that, even in the regular summertime storms. When this was his office, sometimes he'd put his chin into his palm and watch the wood swell and the clouds split wide and the sun stretch over the top of the tree that grew in the courtyard, just below. He watched storms break so suddenly that every little corner of his office would be washed in light, the mannequins and

cutting table and reference books and stacks of paper and his first clumsy, sentimental designs, which he had taped up on the window for just that reason: so that he could see the sunlight through them.

The light sways. Lan Zhan's eyes fly open, frightened - will Yunshen lose power? Will he be left alone in the dark? But before he can even turn around, he sees what's making the light shiver.

There are plants curled above his head.

He hadn't felt them grow. When he shifts a little from one hip to the other, he feels the pull under his ribs, sprouting up from beneath his collarbone. He looks over his shoulder and sees that they've grown *down* too: stretching long fingers from the abused skin of his back onto the floor, latching little fingers into the tile. Above the damp air, the clotted smell of the storm, the air is sweet.

The leaves are a green so dark they're nearly black, except for where they cross the faded yellow light of the desk lamp. The light shows a tracing of veins so fine that they look as if they were carved from jade. They shiver in the air, and so does he.

Lan Zhan twists, reaches. His spine a long line rooting him to the ground. He touches his fingertips to the tips of the leaves, the little white flowers, the rough orange bark underneath.

If he could speak, the rain would drown out the words. But he can't: the breath feels stolen from his lungs. His fingertips twitch reflexively around his mother's sketchbook. His lips part in awe.

And then the lights really do go out, and the windows blow in, and there's a terrible scream in the dark.

The rain pours in, and for a moment the world stops making sense. There's water in his mouth, his hair, the sound of the wind whipping through his ears, yanking on his plants, pulling the plastic wrapped garments down on his head. The scream comes again and this, more than anything else, makes Lan Zhan flinch away - scrambling back towards the hallway and away from the windows, heedless of whether the plants pull away from where they've grown or just out of his body entirely. He loses seconds to pure fear - and

then the scream comes for a third time, and he understands what it is.

“No,” he says, and the sound of it is lost to the wind. He’d made it to the hallway still on his knees in the dark, the box of his mother's things clutched instinctively to his chest. W hen he looks back over his shoulder he sees only the storm, the wreckage of the room, the jagged edges of the blown-out windows catching what little light is left. He knows what's happening. He knows he has to hurry. He gets up, one palm braced slickly into the wet tile floor, the other pressing the cardboard box against the wall with the other in the hope that it will be safer here than where he's going, his shoes slipping before he can get them properly under himself. He goes hurtling down the stairs by blind instinct, decades of memory counting the footsteps for him. He has to see. He has to see. He has to -

“No!”

Lan Zhan hits the entryway at a dead run, and gets two paces into the shipping floor before the world peels away. He stares up into the sky, peering through the rain and his long hair whipping around his face and the vines that he’d dragged along behind him like wings, and denies the truth for a third time into the storm.

“No!”

The roof is gone.

His eyes refuse to process that the typhoon has taken it away. It’s impossible that the roof should be gone, it just can’t be, and for just a moment as he stands under black sky, gasping for breath, maybe it isn’t. He’d torn pages from his mother’s sketchbook accidentally as he ran, and the paper turns sodden in his hand. Then the wind starts to yank him forward centimeter by centimeter, further into the room and the crashing storage racks and the breaking wood pallets. He catches himself on the edge of the door by chance, his arms straining as he shoves his whole body against the wall, too afraid to move forward or backwards. The roof is gone. The roof is gone.

Then horror turns to panic as he watches the corner of his fabrics - so carefully cleaned, so meticulously laid out for the inspector's visit - start to stir in the wind. Mindlessly he lunges forward, and is caught as swiftly as if someone had wrapped a hand around his hair and yanked him back. He fights it - he has to, he has to *do something,* he has to *fix* this, but struggling only sends searing pain up and down his back and arms and neck and his chest, oh what is happening -

There are vines around his wrists, his arms, snaking and twining and pinning him to the wall, keeping him from running into the storm. It hurts - even now that he's not thrashing against them they hurt, because he can feel them heaving themselves as fast as kudzu out of his body. Under his skin the roots stretch their fingers down towards the very core of him, pushing little strands through muscle fiber and sinew, twining along his bones.

He thinks - some kind of hindbrain instinct still intent on his hand painted silks, his carefully embroidered tulle all pulling slowly at the corners up towards the sky - he could break free. He looks down and sees plants burst from the center of his chest, bloody only for a heartbeat until it's washed away by the rain. The sight of it is stunning, unreal - as unreal as the rooftop peeling away into the storm - but if he could only reach his fabrics - if he could only -

- but then he would die.

Wouldn't he?

He fights, still, even as the thought echoes louder and louder until it's bigger than him, *so much* bigger, as big as the vines that are winding around him, stretching up and up along the wall. If he pulls out the plants - if he runs out into the storm - he'll die.

He doesn't want to die.

He doesn't want to die.

He doesn't.

He sags forward. The plants catch him. He's soaked through with

the rain until he isn't, and when he blinks away the rainwater from his eyelashes he sees a canopy of leaves growing above him, an entire forest growing from his heart.

It's enough that he can see clearly as all of his fabrics - all his work, everything - lift upward - swirling, beckoning, calling to him - until they too are gone, sucked up into the storm.

In that moment, nothing matters. Every part of himself has vanished, irrelevant, under the throbbing certainty that he has to live. The only thing he has to do, the only thing he's *ever* had to do, is not die.

Just live - everything else can come later.

-

Lan Zhan wakes. The sun is in his eyes. It's the first thing he registers, and then that he is held, and then that nothing hurts. Nothing hurts. His shoulders are a little stiff, but that's all. He's not laying in a bed. He is -

The memory comes back to him all at once. The roof, vanishing. The swirl of fabrics lifting lazily up into the air. His hand against the cold concrete wall, and then -

He lifts his head from its cradle. His vision comes back slowly, swimming in and out of focus as he looks at the leaves, the vines, and the flowers that had sheltered him through the night. When he shifts a hand the curtain parts, and there's no pain. He steps out cautiously, his hand finding a thicker vine for support as he steps forward. His legs shake underneath him. He stumbles, but he doesn't fall.

Yunshen is a lunar wreckage. He has woken up somewhere entirely unknown. Sunlight slants through the factory's empty roof, broken only by crossbeams and the occasional cloud. It plays over crushed cartons, decades of shipping manifests, broken metal struts that had stored finished goods, maybe, on their way to other parts of the world. The detritus is half sunk into puddles, which shiver in the wind that comes through broken windows. Through some of the windows he can see what happened to the rest of the factory. The other half of the roof has peeled off like skin, and is drooping into the courtyard. The long line of windows is shattered.

Everything is gone. The showroom is gone, the proud little collection of his student work. ORCHiD's finished Resort garments may or may not have been destroyed, depending on what the work floor looks like, but with the fabric gone a handful of garments is useless. Yunshen's second floor offices are definitely ruined, and with them -

His mother's things. Everything he had left of her, which was mostly paper. Everything except the jade bracelet, which is a body-warm weight on his wrist. Which is -

Lan Zhan looks down at himself, his wrists, the softness of his inner elbows, and sees the same skin he woke up with yesterday. Scratched and dirty, to be sure - streaked with muddy rainwater long dried, and curling brown lines that might have been blood - but whole. He's lost his shoes, and his feet are pale against the littered ground. He shivers a little, though it's not cold. He's hungry.

He looks behind himself. On the wall behind him is a forest of vines, as tall as houses, stretching up towards where the roof isn't anymore. They're alive. The leaves rustle in a breeze that feels impossibly gentle. He looks, but there's no root structure, no break in the concrete to show where the plants came from, and yet there they are: alive and undeniable.

He is alive too.

The fact of it seems almost as miraculous, almost as strange.

He’s alive.

He almost laughs. The feeling bubbles up in his chest. When he opens his hands, they’re full of flower petals. He lets them fall to the ground, and he turns away.

Lan Zhan has to force Yunshen’s front door open, which has come partway off its hinges. Here too the world is full of sunlight and drying puddles, which are blinding after the dappled ruin of Yunshen, and scattered with more petals. It’s too much to bear, and he goes to his knees helplessly. He lets himself collapse back against Yunshen’s wall, grit and old whitewash digging lines into the unbroken muscles of his back. His skin feels raw and sensitive, flushed with blood. It’s early, and the sun is still below the rooftops of factories and other buildings around him. The storm must have just barely passed, drifting north or back out to the ocean - he doesn’t know. It doesn’t seem to matter. He’s alive.

He tilts his face up into the sunshine for just a moment.

A moment more.

And then he gets up.

Notes:

> I can't tell you how overwhelmed and grateful I've been for the response my weird little story has gotten, and I hope that you enjoyed the end of it. This was a difficult story to write, for a lot of reasons. We've all of us had a really hard time of things in the past year, also for a lot of reasons. Writing this story helped me to feel less alone, and I hope maybe it made some of you feel that way too.

Thank you so much for reading.

You can find me on twitter.